Ancient and Modern Methods from Burma's Training Camps

Traditional Burmese BOXING

ZORAN REBAC

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by Zoran Rebac

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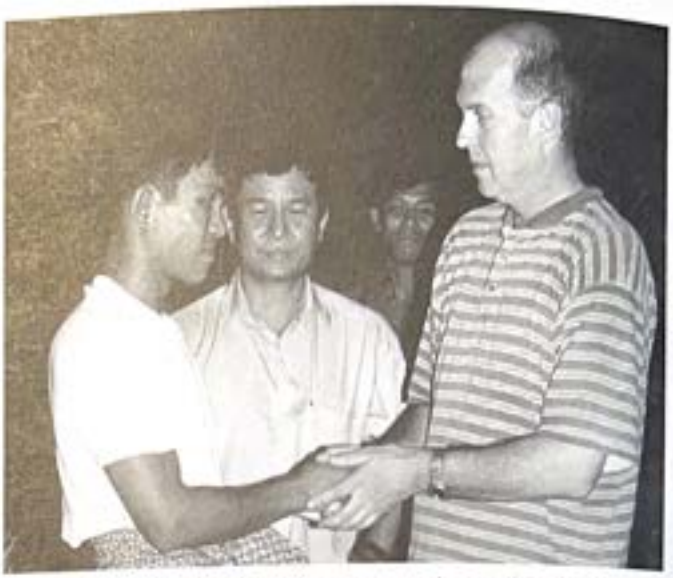
The author with participants and promoters at the Union Day tournament in Myomya, February 12, 2000.



The best fighters in the tournament receive special awards.

With the mayor, officials, and promoters in Myomya.

The author in the Rangoon YMCA gym with Thaung Nyunt and Nilar Win.

The author, far right, and movie actor Linn Linn, far left. (1985)

The author with Niang Waing and his partners. (1987)

The author with friends in the Rangoon kickboxing gym. (1987)

The author visits the Pyompya thaing grandmaster U Hla Thien.

Nilar Win in top form.

Once again, I'd like to express many thanks to
Thaung Nyunt for his help and constant support.

Introduction

The most powerful instinct in all living beings, including humans, is that of self-preservation. Almost all cultures at some time in their past developed a fighting discipline. This is understandable if we accept the fact that life used to be much more brutal and full of all sorts of dangers.

Knowledge of the martial arts used to be a matter of life or death for the individual, but today these ancient arts have become a sport, hobby, or recreation, while some are gone forever. The true cradle of the martial arts is certainly Asia, confirmed by the fact that many Japanese, Chinese, and most recently Korean fighting disciplines have been introduced to the United States and Europe where they have enjoyed undreamed of popularity and, perhaps, a rebirth. In each country these arts have developed differently depending on their specific conditions and needs. They probably emerged more or less independently, in

contradiction to certain theories and legends (the most famous of which is about the Buddhist priest Bodhidharma).

But just as a tropical plant cannot survive unchanged in a chilly climate, the Asian martial arts have been assimilated with certain mutations; most of them have changed to favor the sporting aspects. Due to this shift from art to sport, the Eastern fighting arts have become very popular (especially among young people) because they cultivate both physical and mental health. No equipment is required for most aspects of training, one can practice in an indoor gym or outdoors, and a partner is not obligatory since both individual and group workouts are possible.

I have been possessed with an interest in the roots and a thirst for new knowledge about the martial arts and sports for more than 30 years, and this has led me to travel throughout Southeast Asia. Although I have the rank of 2nd Dan in taekwon do and experience in full- and semicontact fighting, my interest has turned completely to Thai and Burmese traditional boxing. These sports were relatively unknown in Europe when I was learning about them. On four occasions (in 1982, 1985, 1987, 2000) I spent several months in Thailand and Burma. (In 1989, Burma changed to its present name, Myanmar.)

In Thailand I studied Muay Thai (Thai boxing) at the Muangsurin camp in Bangkok and the Singprasout camp (The School of the Great Lion) in Chiang Mai in the north of the country. The Muangsurin camp was at that time one of the 10 most respected camps in Bangkok. Later I spent a short time studying the basics of the Thai self-defense art known as *chai yut* (The Way to Victory) with professor Charneyot.

Most of my time in Burma was devoted to the study of traditional Burmese boxing, or as the Burmese call it, *Myanma yuya louvi*. Training in various and usually very poor camps in Rangoon and Mandalay was a difficult and

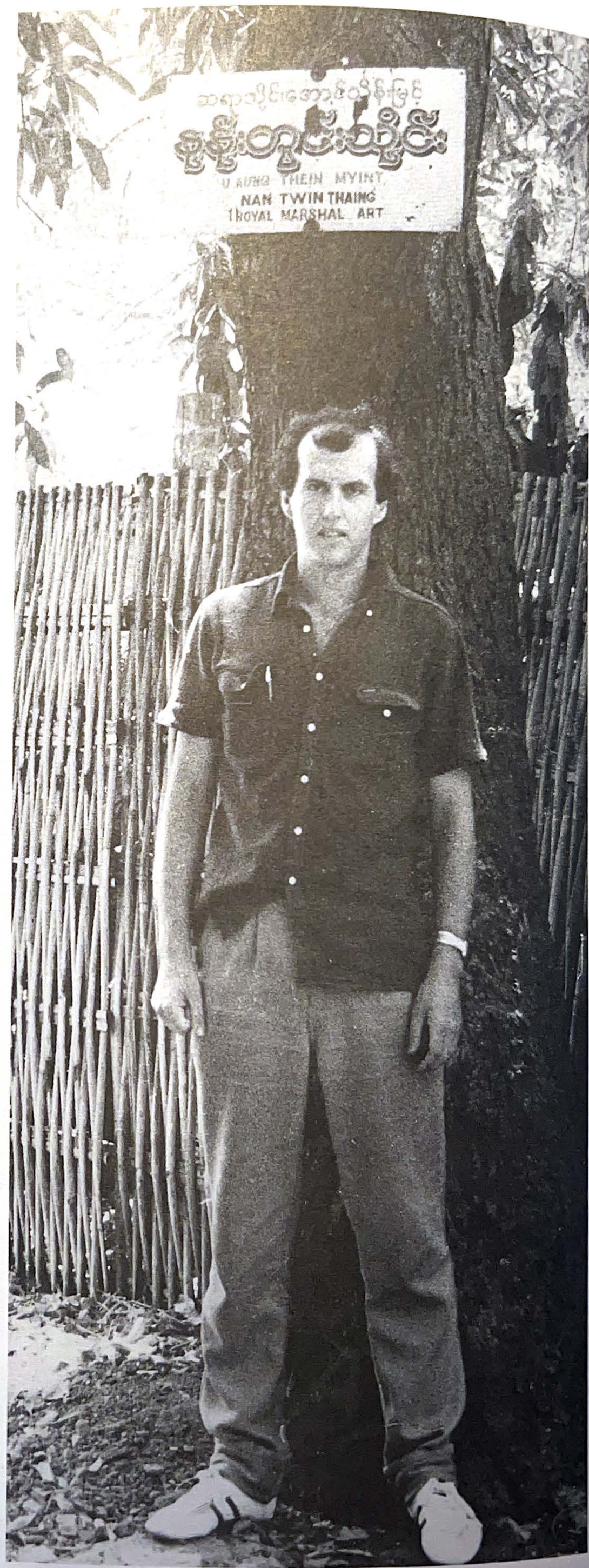


FIGURE 1: Zoran Rebac.

very strange experience, but at the same time I was so impressed with their techniques and bravery that I decide to start collecting the materials for a book. With the help of my friends, I had the great privilege of visiting some famous schools of Burmese martial arts, where I shared my knowledge and took some rare photos and videotape.

Upon my return I wanted to inform the martial arts community and preserve the knowledge that I had gained at great effort and often quite painfully. The result of this attempt is this book, which includes practical instructions and information. The aim of this book is to make martial artists realize that somewhere far away in unknown Burma, the arts exist in a form quite different from karate or taekwon do, performed by strong and brave fighters following ancient rules.

There are no mysterious silver or red belts, 10th Dan grades, or super experts as I see in some magazines today. You are simply on your own in front of your opponent.

The second reason I wrote this book was to preserve all these methods of training, rare photos, rules, and stories of famous boxers, so they would not fall into oblivion. There is practically no literature on Burmese boxing, except for a few small books in Talaing, the language of the Burmese people. My first book, *Thai Boxing Dynamite*, came out in 1982 and has been translated into German and English. The book you are reading now is the result of 17 years of my study and collection of materials relating to Burmese traditional boxing.

I also hope that this book will help all those young people who have not been interested in the martial arts to get involved and begin working out to improve their health, strength, self-confidence, and endurance. They will become better people and members of the community as a result. As they proceed, they will find it easier to overcome their own difficulties and show greater understanding for others. I also believe that those who already have experience in the contact sports, especially in Thai boxing or kickboxing, will learn techniques from this discipline that may help them progress. You can find fine examples of self-defense techniques, too. Interspersed with the description of the sport and techniques are photographs of ancient Burmese architecture and descriptions of some old customs that are vanishing quickly. These do extend beyond the strict limits of the boxing but may be useful information for all those who want to learn something more about this distant and beautiful country.

If this book contributes to the preservation of some original Burmese martial arts techniques, philosophies, and ways of thinking, I will have reached my goal.

1

Burma

Burma is certainly one of the loveliest countries of Southeast Asia. Closed until quite recently to foreigners, it has retained the charm and exoticness of the Orient, just as we imagine it while reading the books of Pearl S. Buck or Vicky Baum.

Around the 10th century, Burma was one of the most powerful states in this part of Asia. The Irawaddy and Salween rivers, with their springs in the Himalayan foothills, make the country very fertile, which has attracted many people over the centuries. It is therefore no surprise to find Chinese and Tibetan influences to the north and Indian to the west, as well as Hmong and Thai influences. Burma borders India and China to the north, Laos and Thailand to the east, Bangladesh to the west and Malaysia to the south. Rangoon, Burma's capital city, is known for Shwedagon, one of the largest Buddhist pagodas in the world, the destination of many Buddhist pilgrims. The gilded point of this exquisite work of ancient Burmese

FIGURE 2: Fishing boats line up on the banks of the Irawaddy River.

civilization climbs more than 300 feet into the sky. Legend says that eight hairs of Buddha have been enshrined in the golden stupa.

The great mixtures of races and tribes are illustrated by the fact that 242 languages are spoken in Burma, and it contains 150 nations and 172 tribes (according to official sources). Most of the population, except for the Burmese, consists of the Karen, Kachin, Mon (Hmong), Shan, Chin, and Arakan peoples who together create the Burmese Socialist Union (now the Union of Myanmar). The history of Burma stretches back 2,500 years and more into the past, comparable in age to Chinese civilization. The Burmese settled the southeastern part of the Tibetan plateau and began to move southward into the area of today's Burma between 800 and 500 B.C., pressured by the more powerful kingdoms of China and Tibet. In the period beginning about 500 B.C. the Burmese tribes established control over the area of the northern part of the Irawaddy River and founded the first large city states of Halingyi, Taundgwingyi, and Sri Ksetra. Then they established the first of five Burmese kingdoms—Pyu.

Buddhism still had not penetrated Burma at that time. The population was predominantly animistic. The kingdoms of Pagan, Pinya, and Enwua followed one after other in chronological order, but the flourishing of cultures and power began with the founding of the Pagan Kingdom in 108 A.D.

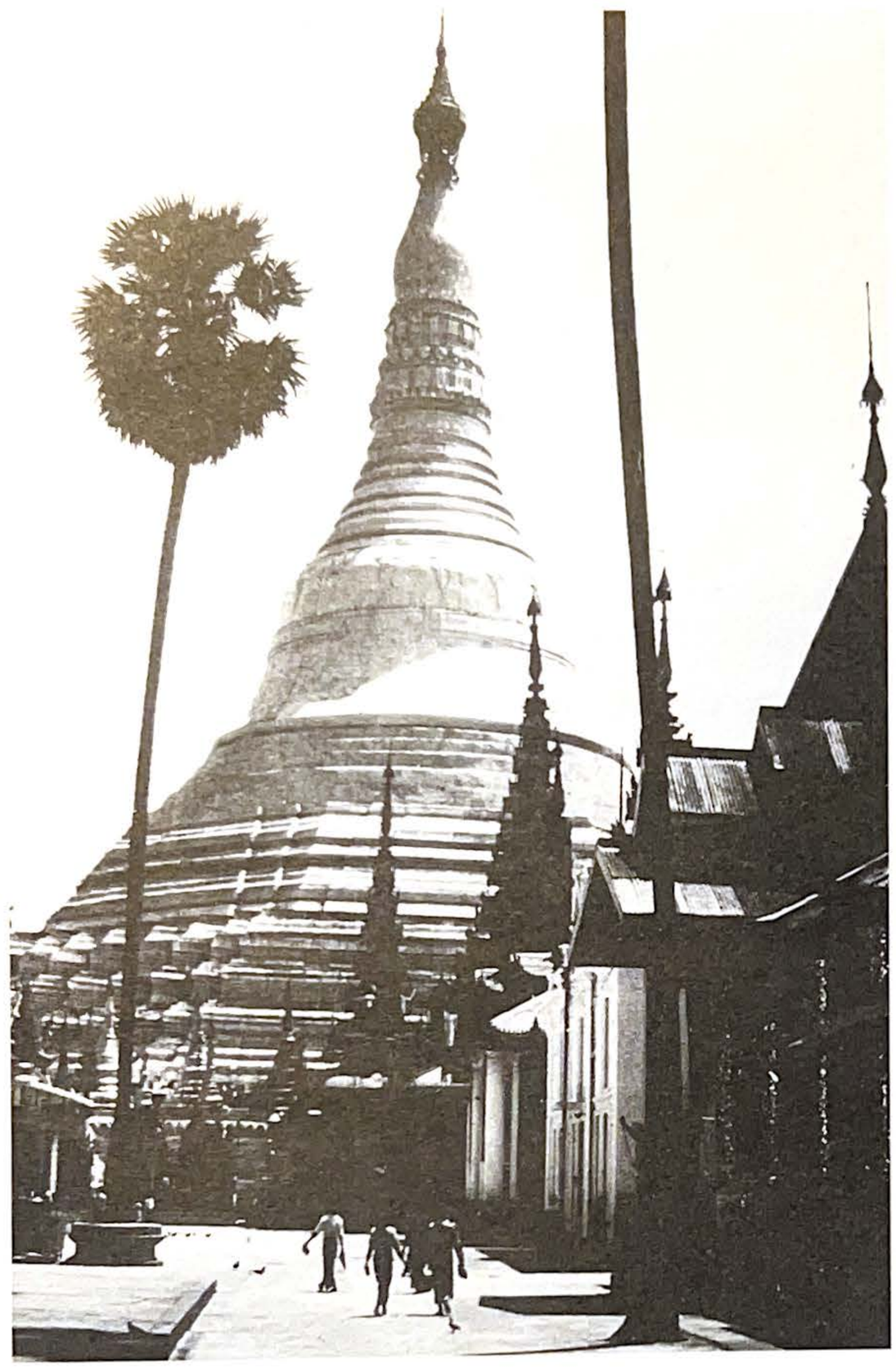


FIGURE 3: Shwedagon pagoda in Rangoon. The Shwedagon is believed to have been built approximately 2,500 years ago, and its great golden dome rises 326 feet above its base. The legend of the Shwedagon tells of two merchant brothers meeting the Buddha, who gave them eight strands of His hair to be enshrined in Shwedagon. With the help of a number of celestial beings, the brothers and the Burmese king discovered the hill where the relics of the previous Buddhas had been enshrined.

The ruins of their old city, with its 5,000 pagodas, are one of today's world wonders. The Burmese took the Talaing alphabet from the native Hmongs and during the reign of King Andaja t'Mensoa they began to embrace Buddhism through missionaries sent by Indian King Ashoka.[1]

Buddhism, which had a dominant influence on Burmese civilization and culture, took definitive hold during the period of King Anawrahta in the 11th century.

Two hundred years later the Pagan Kingdom was destroyed when it was overrun by Mongol hordes from the north, but after brief subjugation to Kublai Khan's conquerors Burma rose up and again became a powerful state. For the next several centuries Burma led wars with its neighboring peoples: the Khmers, Thais, and Vietnamese to the east, and the Indian rulers to the west. There were two invasions from China—the most powerful of the Asian kingdoms at the time—that were repulsed during this period as well.

During the 17th and 18th century the Burmese ruled most of the Southeast Asian peninsula (except Thailand), but their expansion toward Assam (northeastern India) incited a war with the far superior forces of the British Empire. After a valiant but hopeless clash in 1878, Burma lost its independence and became a British colony. King Thibaw, the last king, surrendered to the British and later was forced to leave Mandalay and spend rest of his life in exile in India. No successors to the throne were left.

During the Second World War there was a brief but bloody Japanese rule, against which the Burmese developed a strong resistance movement. When the war ended, independence was proclaimed on January 4, 1948, and the Union of Burma was founded under the leadership of U Nu and General Ne Win. Today the Burmese hold firmly to the policy of "Buddhistic socialism" in conducting their foreign affairs, aiming for peaceful coexistence and non-alignment.

THE MARTIAL ARTS IN BURMA

The country's rich cultural and historical background and the intermingling of so many peoples and influences resulted in a broad tradition of combat disciplines. If we were to describe each of these in just a few words it would take up most of this book, so we will limit

ourselves to a brief description of the most important facts about each of these arts.

Thaing is the art of self-defense, which branches out into many different styles. There is a mixture of armed (usually stick, two-sword, and knife techniques) and unarmed techniques (punching and kicking to vital points, joint locks, throws, and sitting defense techniques). Unfortunately, the disciplines in this first group are gradually dying out, and if nothing is done they will be forgotten or mentioned only in passing in folklore. Great demonstrations of the Burmese martial arts are held every year on Independence Day, and on this rare occasion one can see live exhibitions of the fighting disciplines of the first group.

The martial arts, in Burma as elsewhere in Asia, developed in two basic directions, armed (*banshay*) and unarmed (*bando*) techniques.

- Banshay includes fencing (*dakaou che*), fighting with a lance (*tlantu che*), fighting with a knife (*da jyau che*), and fighting with a stick (*toud' che*).
- Bando includes the empty-hand methods of wrestling (*nagan lo*), the secret art (*djumba*), and traditional Burmese boxing (Myanma yuya louvi).

Two short swords are used for fencing, similar to the arts as practiced in Thailand. A large sword was used earlier that was similar to the Japanese katana, but somewhat larger and heavier. The lances had both a blade and a point, and there were special shorter lances for throwing. Stick and sword methods of fighting can be found nowadays in various thaing styles.

Wrestling (*nagan lo*) used to be extremely popular. The technique was influenced by India and Tibet, where wrestling is popular today. Some of these techniques are preserved in Burmese boxing, too.

Various thaing arts are still very popular in Burma, especially among scholars. There are great number of schools and styles. The main branches are:

- Nan twin thaing (Royal Palace style)
- Pyompya thaing (school of the "hard-soft way")
- Neganadai thaing (snake style)
- Shan thaing, a martial art under the Chinese influence. (Shan province is close to the Chinese border.)

The thaing fighting arts are focused mainly on self-defense. While the words "soft" and "hard" are not to be taken literally, we can say that soft circular movements predominate, that blows are combined with holds, and animal forms (such as monkey, scorpion, panther, bull, and cobra) exist similar to Chinese kung-fu styles. Almost every region has its own specific style of the thaing art; in effect there are several hundred distinct schools. The famous teacher U Ba Than Gyi tried to unite the techniques from the different thaing styles and modernize them by founding a new Hantavadi bando system, but death interrupted his work.

In some parts of Burma, thaing resembles the hard Shaolin styles, so it is rather difficult to precisely categorize the great number of different arts. The most famous are Nan twin (Figure 4), Neganadai (the snake style), and Pyompya (Figure 5). Pyompya, or the school of the "opposite way" or "hard-soft way," as we have tentatively translated it, uses a surprising fighting strategy rarely seen elsewhere, with round blocks and punches mixed with effective palm strikes.

Djumba is a fighting art no longer known, though we know it did exist in the past. For this reason many call it the forgotten, or secret, art. Its origins and substance are lost to the past. All we know is that it contained elements of acrobatics and that it was practiced exclusively

FIGURE 4: Grandmaster "Saya Minn Yekkha," chief instructor of the Burmese Martial Arts Institute, teaches his young students in Nan twin (Royal Palace style).

in ancient monasteries (prior to the introduction of Buddhism) by warrior monks (*djidji*) who will be discussed later on.

Of all these disciplines, the most popular and familiar is traditional Burmese boxing. It is as ancient as the Burmese nation.

TRADITIONAL BURMESE BOXING

History

This ancient Burmese art of combat with the bare hands and feet goes back thousands of years. Although the origins and the complete rules and techniques used then are not known precisely, there are manuscripts mentioning Burmese boxing in the earliest documentation of Burmese culture.

Inscriptions have been found on the walls of the royal palace in Pagan that refer to the

FIGURE 5: U Hla Thien, Grandmaster of Pyompya thaing, is in his eighties and still teaches. When I first met him, he impressed me with round blocks and fantastic palm strikes. He has truly dedicated his life to the martial arts.

period before the founding of the Burmese state. According to these stories, an order of warrior monks (the djidji) ruled long before the Pagan kingdom was founded. At that time Buddhism had not yet been introduced to Burma, so very little is known about ruling period of the djidji. The inscriptions tell us that these monks practiced exhausting exercises in their monasteries that included fencing, fighting with lances, riding, swimming, and rowing, and that they were particularly skilled at wrestling and boxing (which were, at that time, part of a single discipline). The people were afraid of these monks because they were unbelievably strong and quick in handling weapons; it was believed that their strength came from some mysterious Bon deity.[2] With time, the process of developing the martial arts was separated from these monks, who gradually lost their control.

On the Nagai Pagoda (dating back to the 11th century under the Pagan Kingdom), a relief scene shows a fight between two boxers. The boxers in the relief are wearing the traditional longyi[3] (an obligatory part of dress in Burma even today), and their legs are tattooed with decorative ornamentation.

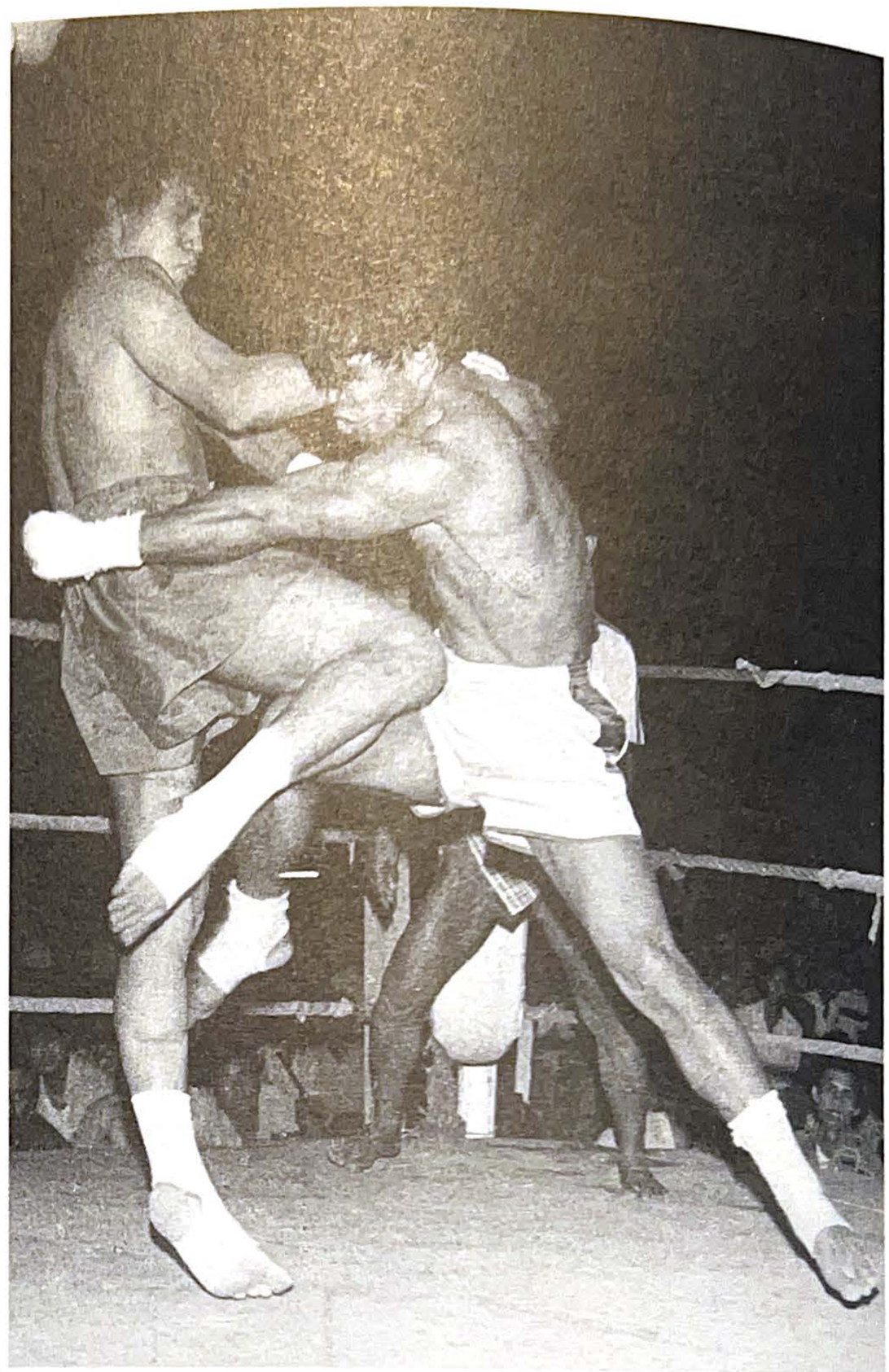


FIGURE 6: Matches in traditional Burmese boxing include bare hand punches, kicks, knee and elbow strikes, and head butting.

From the period of the Pinya Kingdom there are inscriptions that indicate how popular and widespread boxing (louvi) was at that time. Tournaments were organized as part of Buddhist festivals, some sponsored by the king himself. The winners were given prizes and honorable titles (louvi to) and their names were engraved in gold letters on the walls of the royal palace.

We learn from one such inscription that Onsigou Tanaia Syasza, acclaimed at that time as the "king of the boxers," usually took the prizes in such tournaments. The prize was 15 to 20 horses, which was a real fortune. But we should tell the whole story, just as it is written on the old tiles (*chausha*).

The high-ranking feudal lord On Pong Poa had an excellent young boxer, Shan Dji, who had won many fights. No one could find a boxer to beat him, and since the royal tournaments would soon be held, the king's minister suggested to King Enwua Meng that he should invite 69-year-old Tanaya Shyaszi to fight for the royal name. Tanaya accepted the invitation immediately. The entire royal family came to watch the tournament. Before the fight, as dictated by the custom of the day, the boxers danced and sang in a ceremony in which they listed all their great victories and memorable moments. Contrary to expectations, older Tanaya Shyaszi was the stronger of the two, and with a few blows of

the hands and feet he managed to topple powerful Shan Dji. The inscription further lists the prizes that courageous Tanaya took home—three gold medals, two kilos of silver, and 20 horses!

Burmese boxing in its current form has hardly changed over the centuries. Boxers do not wear gloves, they are barefoot, and almost all kinds of blows are allowed, including head butting.

Throwing can be used in close-range fighting, while the rare limitations include a ban on blows to the genitals, blows with an open hand, and hitting the opponent when he is down. It is therefore no wonder that Burmese boxing is considered one of the roughest of the fighting sports today.

But in the period when the British ran Burma, this sport was close to dying out. All tournaments and training sessions were banned and contests were only held in outlying villages, far from the surveillance of the authorities. In many parts of Burma the interest in boxing waned, but the British could not eliminate it completely. Finally realizing how deeply embedded it was in the tradition and folk customs, they lifted the ban and the British governors even began to organize tournaments to earn the support of the population. Here is a true story from that time:

The English recruited soldiers among the Burmese during World War I. One of these soldiers was young T'ka Polatdyi, who fought on the Mesopotamian front, which is now part of Iraq. The British included classical European boxing in military activities, and a match was held between an infamous sergeant and one of his rather dark-skinned soldiers. Realizing that it was going to be hard to beat his opponent, the sergeant began breaking all the rules and in the end he only managed to down the other man by fighting dirty. After that, he continued to challenge all the other soldiers to fight. Polatdyi accepted the challenge. When he stepped into the improvised ring he refused the offer of gloves, so the match proceeded with bare hands.[4] To everyone's surprise Polatdyi punched and kicked at the same time, and the sergeant fell. After recovering, the sergeant ordered that Polatdyi be punished for breaking the rules, to which Polatdyi replied: "You were the first to break your rules, while I was playing by rules of boxing in my country that you don't understand!" We don't know how the young soldier managed in the end, but the story is an amusing illustration of how deeply rooted traditional Burmese boxing is in the awareness of the Burmese.

The major tournaments are usually held during the Buddhist festival Dipoun poyda (the festival of the full Moon) held every year in late March or early April. The most famous were boxers from the Mon and Karen regions. This is how one such contest looks like even today in the Karen villages:

After the rice harvest is over, great bonfires are lit and an orchestra plays nearby with instruments made of hollow bamboo stalks, which are pounded on the ground to produce sound. The fighters do not fight for a prize but for their own satisfaction or, as the Burmese say, *apoyda louvi*. Boxers come up to the fire one by one and dance the ceremonial dance, and then finish with the *sengho*, or challenge. Then the combatants go to the referees and agree to pairs of opponents. The match is held on trampled ground surrounded by rope. The villagers prepare food for all the visitors, certain that their harvest will be even better next year after this ritual.

The Rules

We have said that Burmese traditional boxing has not changed since it first began. The boxers continue to fight barefoot and their fists are bound only in bandages (*patti*). They are

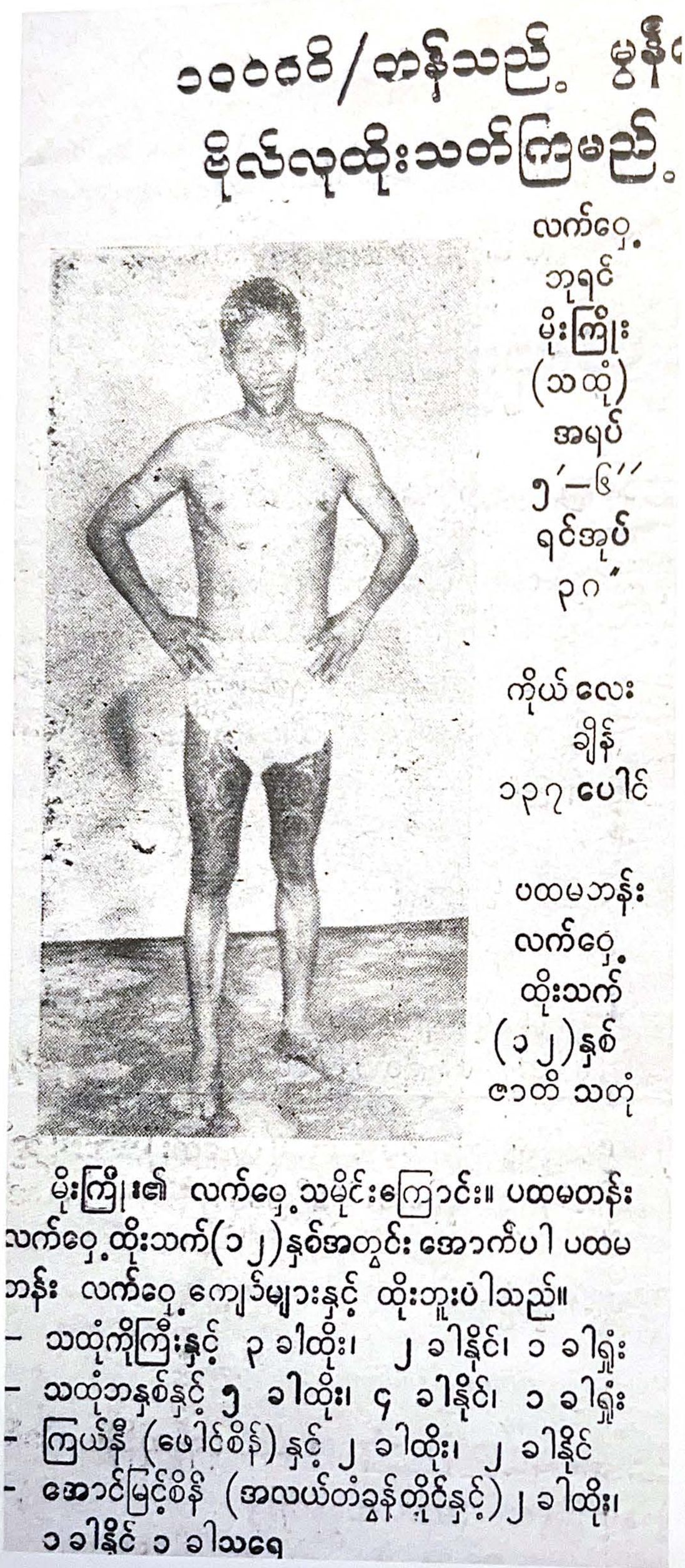


FIGURE 7: Moju is a living legend who went undefeated for 12 years, ruling the ring in the 1960s and '70s. His body build was not impressive, but he was so strong that most of his opponents fell unconscious from his strong grip during close-range fighting. He is the only present-day holder of the title king of boxers.

permitted to wear ankle and knee bandages and must wear groin and mouth protection.

Two referees in the ring run the match. This may seem unusual, but it is necessary in Burmese boxing, especially when the combat reaches its culmination. There are three to five side judges outside the ring whose task is somewhat less demanding; they choose the contestants, give out the special awards, and extend or cut short the tournament. It is interesting that only a former boxer can became a referee. The presence of a doctor is also required at the major tournaments.

While Burmese boxing is not broken down into weight divisions like similar fighting disciplines, the side judges try to choose fighters with similar builds whenever possible. The referees in the ring (*wai dai*), unlike the side judges outside the ring (*kou dai*), are obliged to examine the fighters before the match, and of course they must intervene during the fight if necessary. They are often referred to as the stop-and-start referees.

The boxers are divided into four classes (there used to be six) according to skill and accomplishment. A boxer at the onset of his fighting career is in the fourth class and in order to break through to the first, he must pass a difficult and dangerous route that demands great skill and a brave heart. Aside from that, the flexible system of rounds requires great stamina and the ability to receive numerous punches and kicks.

Traditional tournaments today occur in this order: first, all the pairs complete the first round. Once all of them have taken their turns, the second and third rounds begin. After this—if the match is still going on—the fourth round must be decisive. The fourth round is not limited to three minutes as the earlier ones are, but can last until one of the boxers wins by knockout, surrender, or interruption due to injury. The boxer is allowed to wipe blood away

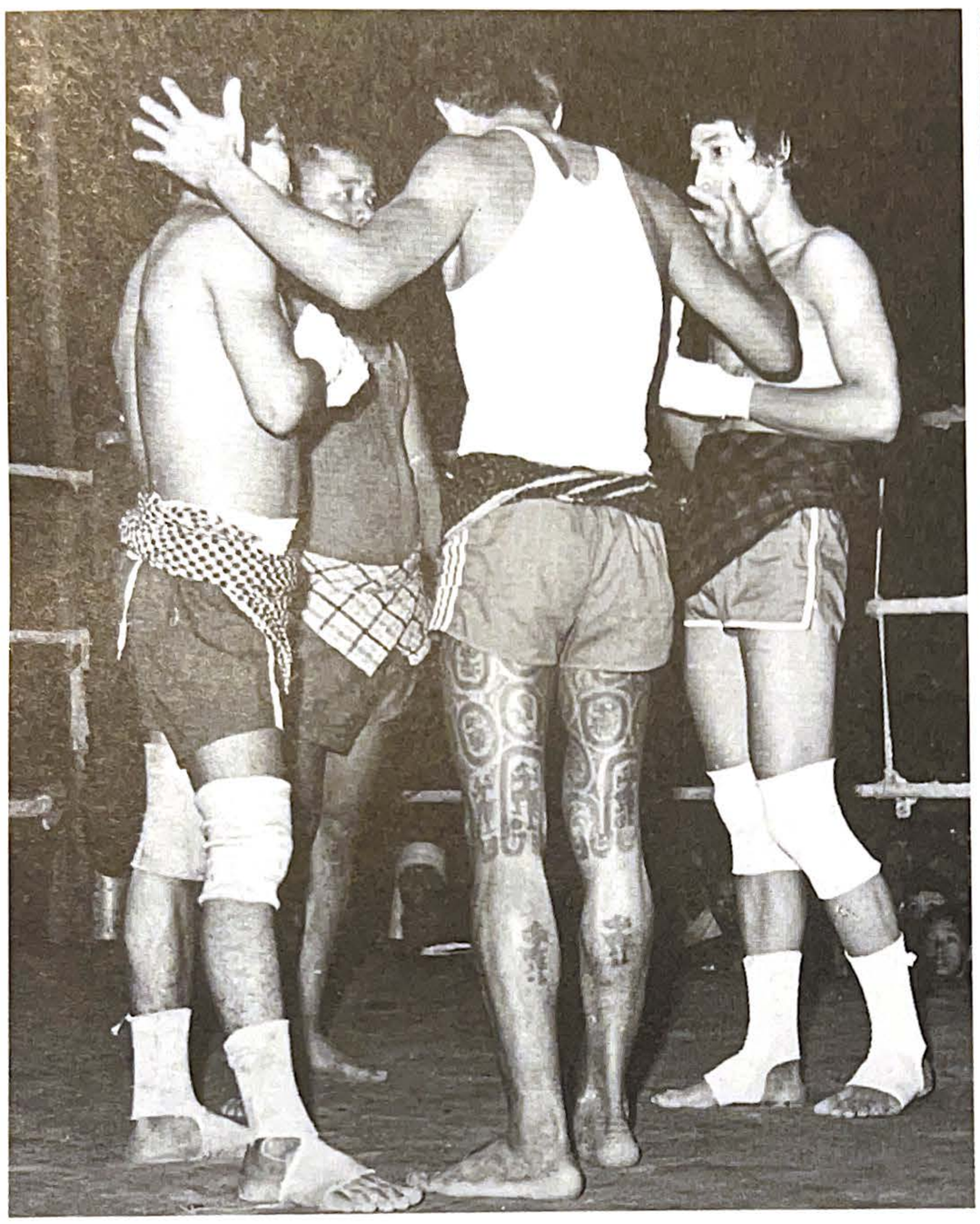


FIGURE 8: There is a short repetition of the rules before each match.

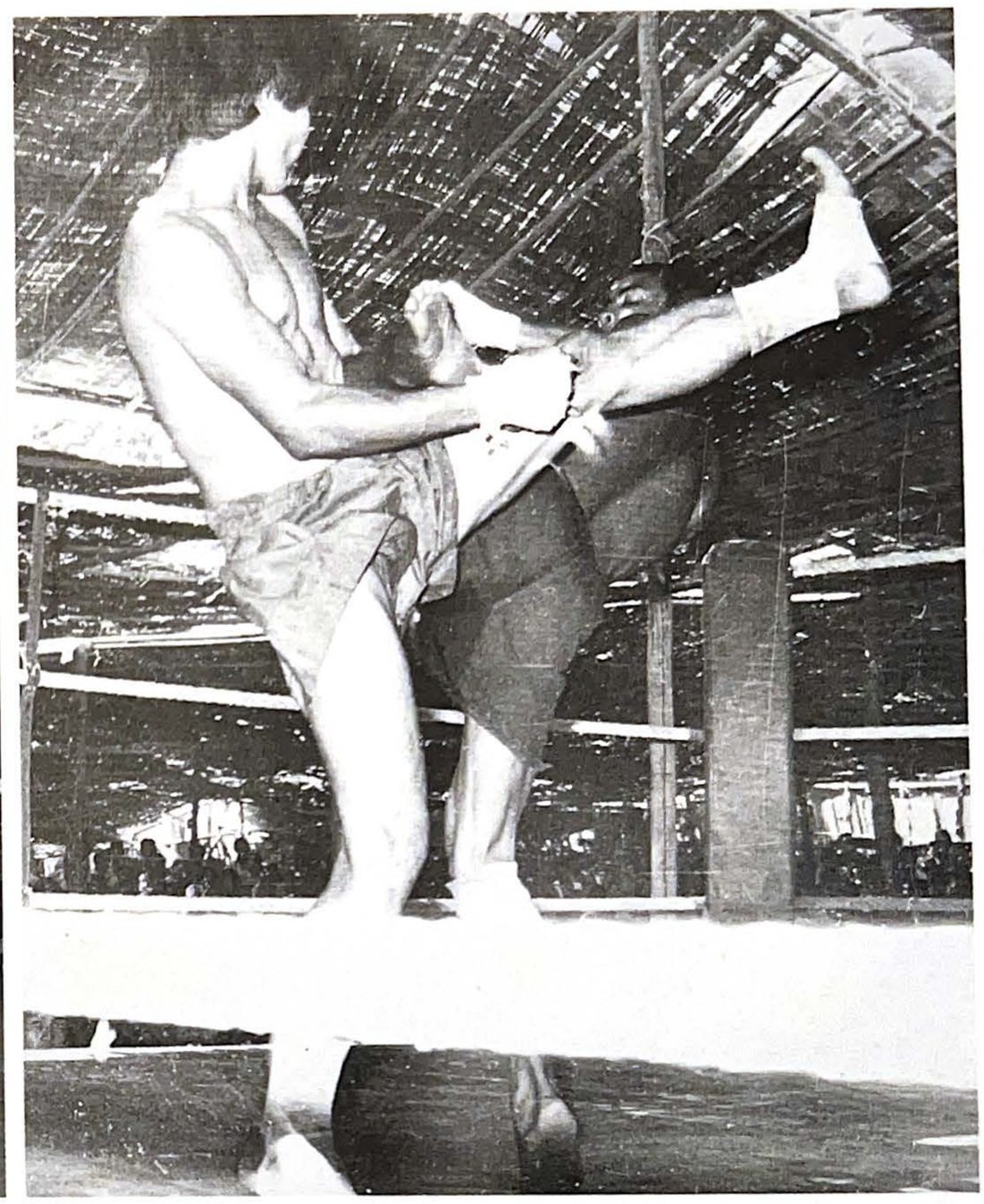


FIGURE 9: The rules allow almost all kinds of punches and kicks.

twice, but injuries that cause bleeding that cannot be stopped mean an automatic end to the match. This saves the boxers from dangerous temptation and the audiences from ugly scenes. It is interesting too, that a boxer can call for a break twice during the first three rounds, but not in the final round. They use this opportunity when they have been shaken or in a knockdown, mainly to recover from hard punches or kicks.

Veteran boxers remember matches in which the last round went on for several hours, though this is rare today. Boxers usually fight in shorts over which a triangular kerchief, the longyi, is tied, though this custom and the custom of tattooing the legs[5] are slowly dying out. Here, in short are the basic traditional rules:

1. Permissible blows are with clenched fists, elbows, lower arms, knees, feet, shins, and head.
2. The fighting cannot begin before the referee gives the signal by parting his hands or before the boxers indicate that they are ready.
3. When one of the boxers gives a sign with outstretched hand and open fist that he cannot go on with the match, the other fighter is obliged to stop.
4. The boxer gives a sign that he is ready to fight in three ways: by clapping his hands, nodding his head, or slapping his hand to his elbow.[6]
5. At close range (wrestling) a fighter can signal that the fight should stop by lightly slapping his opponent's back with his hand. The referee interrupts a fight in the same way.
6. When the opponent falls from a blow or is knocked down, the fight is automatically stopped. There is no countdown; the others wait for the boxer who is down to recover

and give a signal for continuing the match.

7. Blows to the genital area are forbidden.
8. Blows to the neck and face with palms or chopping are forbidden.
9. Choking, scratching, pinching, and pulling hair are forbidden.
10. Boxers who spend most of the round fighting defensively by standing in only one corner of the ring lose the fight due to their inferiority.
11. Wrestling techniques are forbidden when one of the opponents is down.
12. Attacking from behind is forbidden.
13. A boxer who breaks these rules more than twice intentionally is excluded from further competition.

The modern rules have changed considerably; in some tournaments there is just one referee in the ring, the boxer has the right to call for a break once during the first three rounds, and there is a countdown introduced for fallen boxers.

The Ceremony and Boxing Dance

Traditional Burmese boxing would not be what it is without its colorful and charming opening ceremony (*kato bue*), the boxing dance (*louvi yi pya*), and the orchestral accompaniment through the entire course of the fight (*sayensia*), consisting mostly of traditional instruments. The initial ceremony is conducted according to old Burmese customs to ensure a fortunate outcome, since Burmese boxing is quite a dangerous discipline, as you will soon realize. The referees and match organizers conduct the ceremony. (Figure 12)

Various fruits—coconuts, bananas, and pineapples, and red grass (*kon*), which is chewed throughout Asia—are placed in large dishes. Also in the dishes are several old coins and two lighted candles. The referees and

FIGURE 10: There is flexible round system in traditional Burmese boxing.

FIGURE 11: This is a rough and dangerous fighting discipline and isn't for everybody. Injuries and knockdowns are quite common.

FIGURE 12: Kato bue, the opening ceremony performed for a happy end to the tournament

FIGURE 13: As in Muay Thai boxing, the traditional orchestra plays an important role in events, but the sound and tune are quite different.

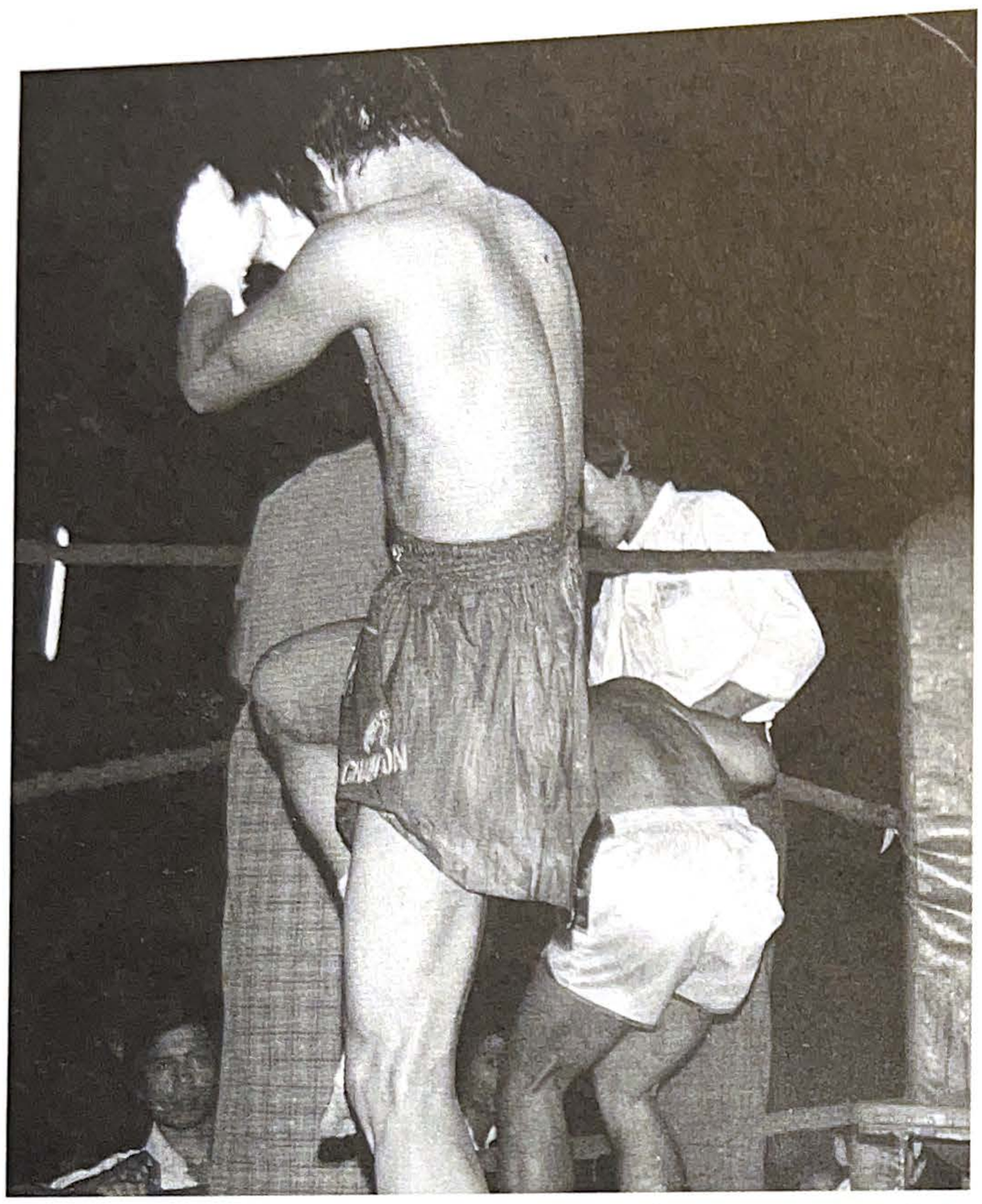


FIGURE 14: The boxing dance is hard to describe. There are a great number of styles depending on the individual and his home province. There is also a difference between the way Buddhist and non-Buddhist boxers greet the audience.

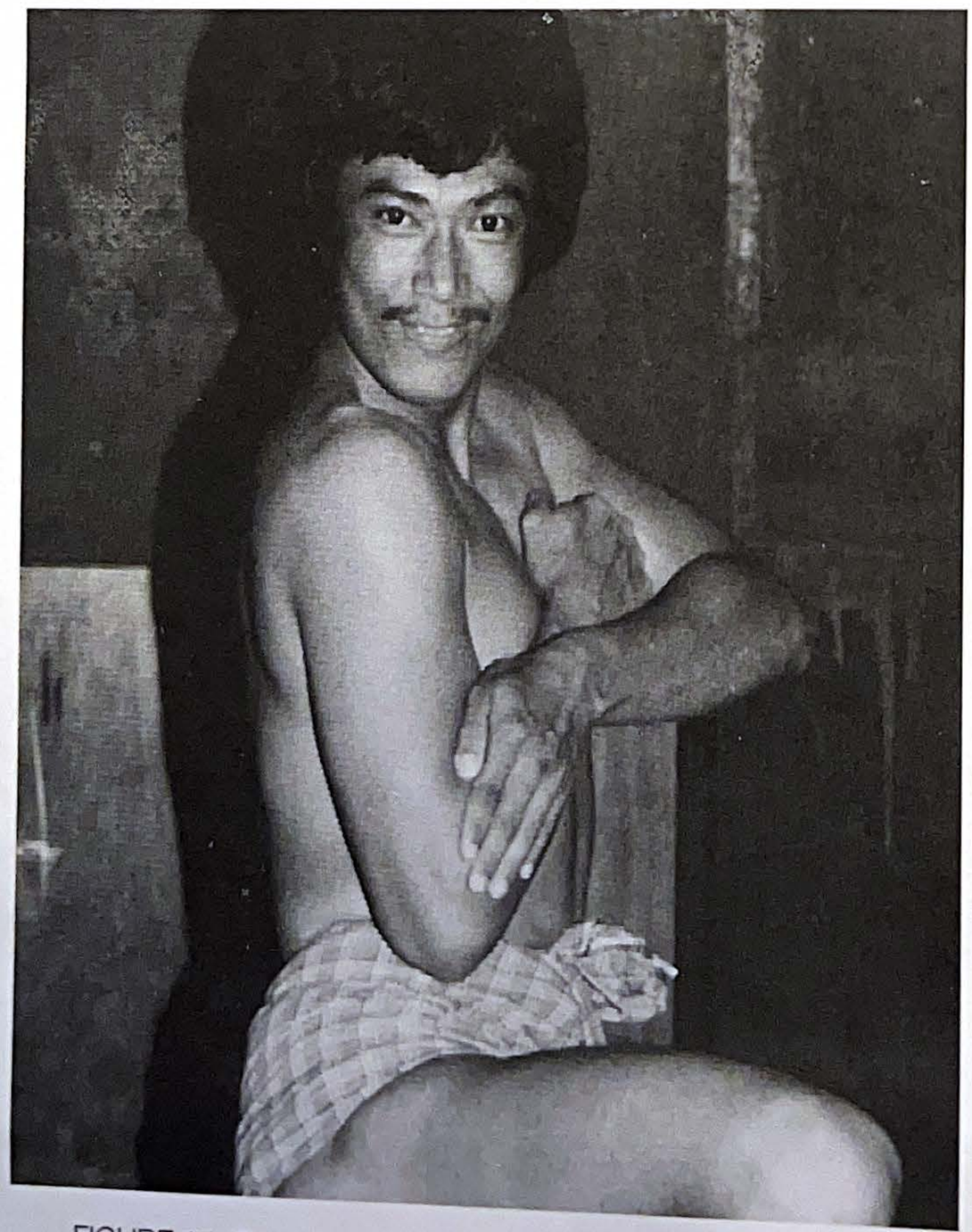


FIGURE 15: The boxer's dance ends with a challenge (sengho), performed here by actor and Burmese boxing enthusiast Linn Linn.

organizers then circle around the corners of the ring accompanied by the orchestra, which plays a special melody for the occasion. After this the tournament may commence.

The orchestra (Figure 13) consisting of a circle of small drums (*sainwaing*), gongs (*kye waing*), a large drum (*puttma*), xylophone (*pattala*), a Burmese oboe (*nhai*), cymbals (*yagwin*), and bamboo rattles (*wa lat khoke*) is surrounded by a railing and situated, according to ancient custom, to the south or east of the ring. It is considered bad luck if a woman crosses the railing surrounding the orchestra; if this happens, the entire ceremony must be repeated.

The importance of the musicians' role is indicated by the fact that the boxers, when entering the ring, first greet the members of the orchestra, then the referees and public. They continue with the boxing dance, finishing with the challenge. Unlike a Muay Thai boxing ceremony, the winner in Burmese boxing has the right to repeat his dance at the end of the match to celebrate his victory. The dancing moves are also quite different than in Muay Thai.

The boxer dance (Figure 14) always begins by paying respect to the teacher or coach, and ends with a challenge, i.e. slapping the palm three times to the right elbow (Figure 15). At this point the masters of ceremony present the boxers to the audience. They announce which provinces the boxers come from and what their accomplishments have been in the past. In the end, with a bow to all four sides and hands crossed on their chests, the boxers greet the audience and then the referees (Figure 18). When the boxers greet each other before the fight, it is customary for the younger boxer to approach the older one; their greeting communicates, among other things, mutual respect and fair play. Then the orchestra starts playing with a more lively rhythm and the referees, backed by loud

cheering from the audience, give the sign for the beginning of the fight.

Tournaments

The tournament is the sole form of competition in traditional Burmese boxing. The fighting season lasts from October to April, and in this period numerous tournaments are organized all over Burma. The championship tournament is held, of course, in Rangoon.

Boxers of the first class receive prizes of more than 25,000 kyats (about $4,000), but Burmese boxing is still quite far from the status of a professional sport. (This is one of the main differences when comparing Burmese to Thai boxing.) The champions, however, are quite popular and well known throughout the country. Hardly a man can be found who hasn't heard of Tamandja-Tiger, famous champion of Burma, Pahne the Giant, or Moju, the king of boxers. The very name "Tamandja" means "man-tiger" in translation—a tiger in human form—and indicates that this is a man of great strength and endurance who is able to stand up against the best Thai boxers or the finest contestants of Kyokunshinkai karate (Figure 38).

Moju's story (Figure 7) is unbelievable. He was a man of non-athletic build, but for more than 12 years he was undefeated. The peak of his boxing career was in the 1960s and '70s, and those who saw him in action said his handgrip on the necks of his opponents was so strong that they usually fell unconscious. The technique he used was similar to that used in judo.

Nilar Win (Bright Sapphire) and Niang Waing, who you will see in most of the photographs in this book, are among the best and most respected boxers in Rangoon. Although they are ruthless fighters in the ring, they patiently answered my questions and were glad to demonstrate their techniques.

There are three basic kinds of tournament

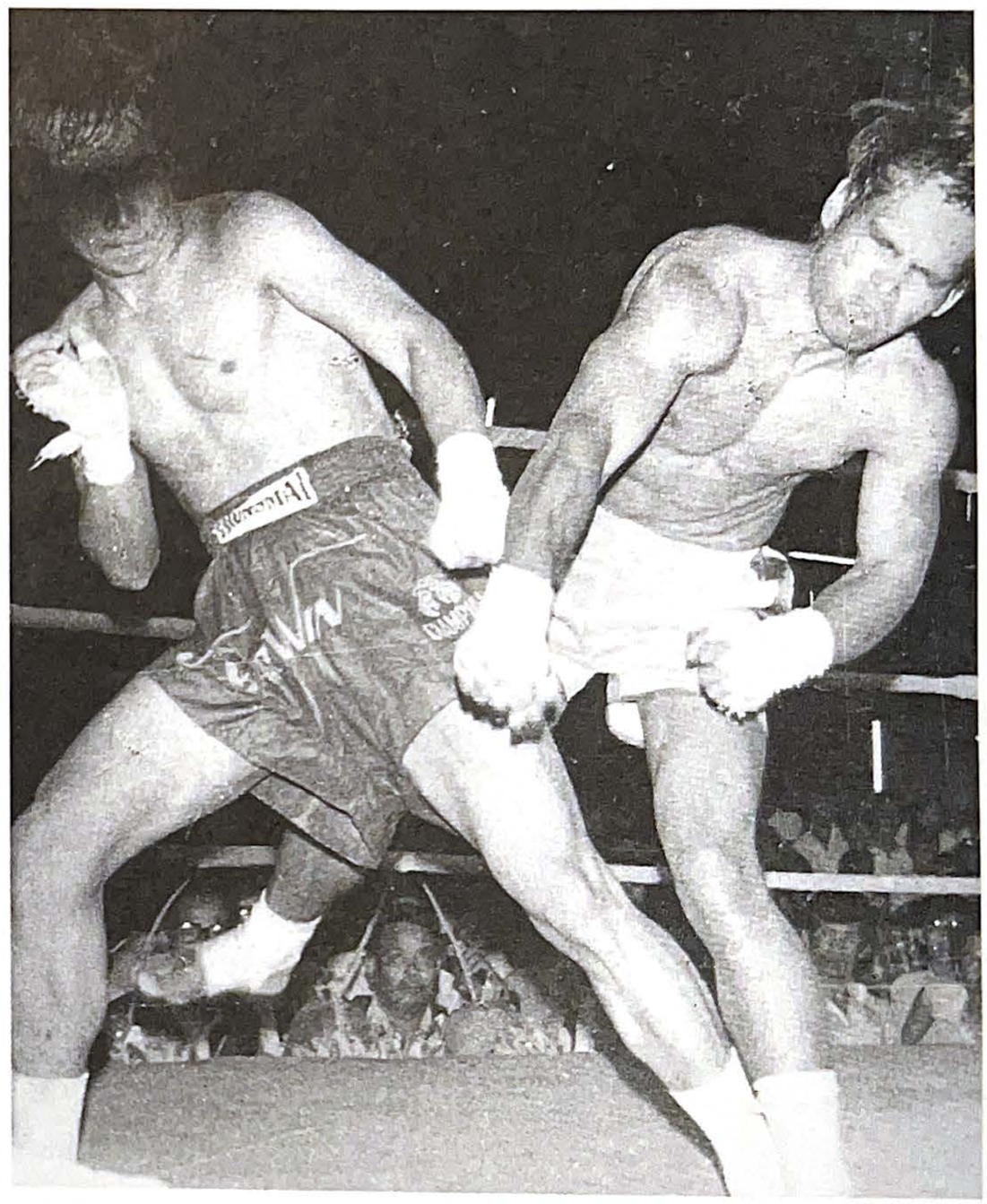


FIGURE 16: This is a common scene from a tournament—the exchange of full power punches.

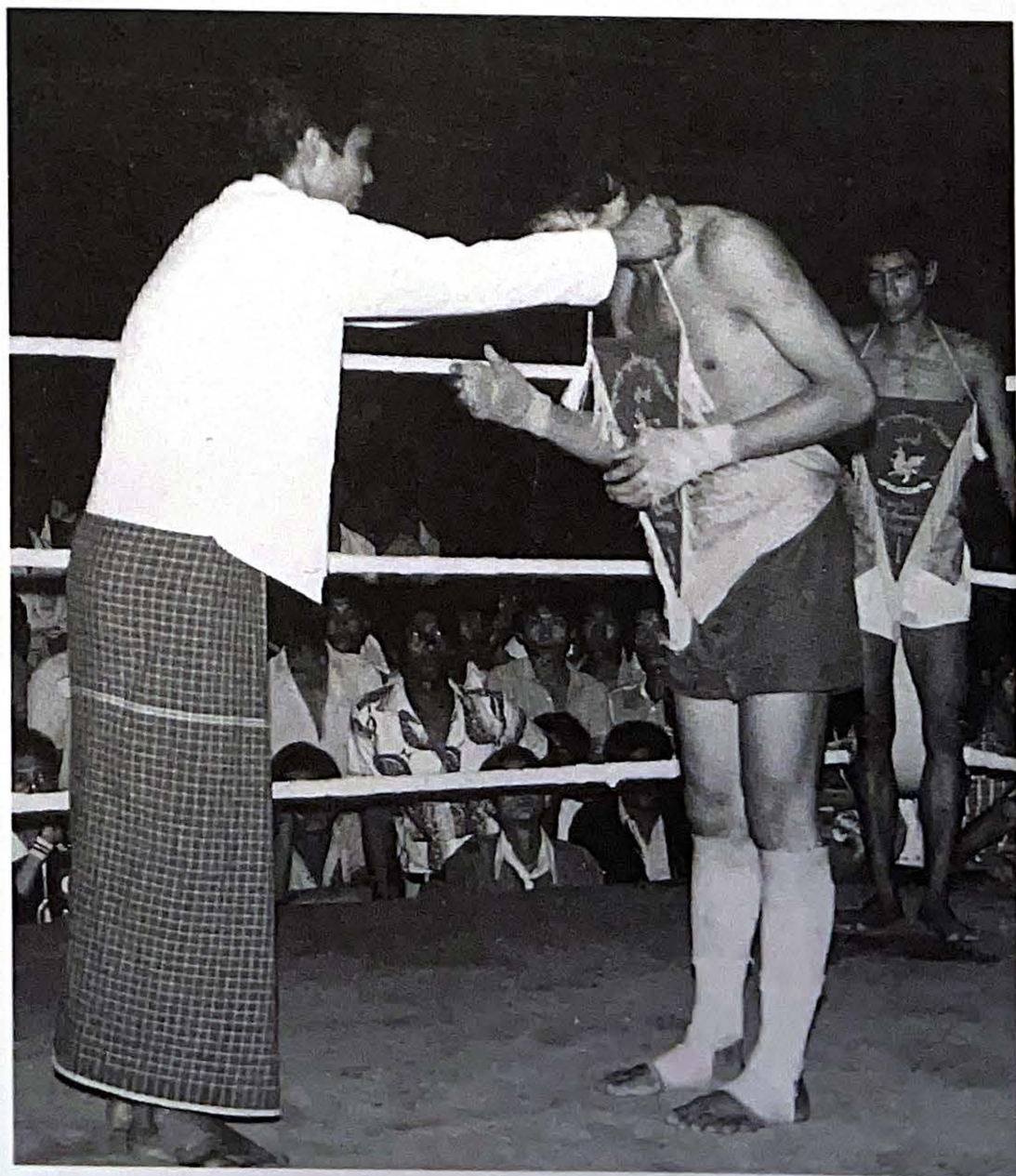


FIGURE 17: The winner receives the flag. Tournaments are the only form of competition in Burmese boxing.

PREUSSISCHER STAATS-BIBLIOTHEK ZU BERLIN

in which Burmese boxers compete. All of them include awards in the form of flags (Figures 17 and 19), which used to be worn wrapped around the waist. Today the flags are smaller, triangular, and interwoven with gold or silver threads. Each flag is in a different color and comes with a cash award. (Figures 20 and 21)

The smallest tournaments are called *sengho pue* (challenge tournament) and are usually organized in villages or smaller towns. Four to six pairs usually fight. If the fight is not finished after the third round, the prizes are divided equally among the boxers.

The *louvi lala pue* (flag tournaments) are very exacting tournaments. Only the best boxers (first and second class) take part. First the tournament is proclaimed along with the price of the flag. The boxers who want to take part in the fights strip to the waist and sit around the ring; the referees then look them over and choose the pairings. Two boxers from the same village or town cannot fight in the first match.

After pairs are designated and presented to the audience, the boxing dance takes place followed by the fights. The four best boxers receive flags and prizes. As mentioned earlier, when the fourth round is reached there is no longer a time limit.

In most tournaments, the fights begin with lower-class boxers who can compete with boxers of higher standing only after winning in their own rank. After three victories in his rank a

FIGURE 18: Nilar Win (Bright Sapphire) greets the audience.

FIGURE 19: Winners of tournaments receive various flags and prizes.

FIGURES 20 AND 21: The winner has the right to be happy: he's got honor, a money award, and is not seriously injured.

fighter moves one point closer to a higher class.

The *cashou kvenshon pue* are the top-level tournaments in which only first-class boxers may compete. The prizes are large and the boxers win by a process of elimination. Each of the boxers must have had at least four fights. Sometimes, as part of such tournaments, the best boxers compete from different provinces. The winners are given the honorable title of *shonson* (the best) and are obliged to defend it the following year.

Most of the boxers of Burma wear amulets (*a so*) in tournaments, usually wrapped around their upper arms or waists. They believe the amulets will bring luck and help them win or escape serious injury. A special branch of folk medicine has also developed (sometimes with amazing results!) that has the task of stopping bleeding and soothing pain using various grasses and ointments. At one time, boxers had various "holy" inscriptions (*piszi*) tattooed on their arms and chests with quotes from the Sutra. When one moved a tattooed palm over the injury, the bleeding stopped. (Autosuggestion probably played a considerable role here.)

1. Indian King Ashoka ruled in the third century B.C. on the territory of today's Indian federal state of Oris. When he conquered the kingdom of Kalinga in eastern Bengal he came in contact with the Burmese. The legend says that after this bloody victory, King Ashoka became a Buddhist and dedicated the rest of his life to spreading this faith.
2. Bon is an ancient religion of Tibet.
3. The longyi is a colorful cloth, rectangular in shape, which is wrapped around the hips. Almost all the inhabitants of Southeast Asia wear it.
4. Don't forget that in the late 19th century in Europe and the United States, people still boxed with their bare hands.
5. The custom of tattooing used to be part of the transition from boyhood to manhood. Even today one can see brightly tattooed legs, especially among older men.
6. According to the old rules, the fighters started up the match following the break by standing on one another's feet with outstretched hands, starting to fight at the referee's signal. There is no need to stress the fact that speed and reflexes were decisive here.

2

The Nine Weapons of Traditional Burmese Boxing

Unlike modern Thai boxing, which uses eight weapons, there are nine weapons in traditional Burmese boxing: the two fists, knees, soles of the feet, elbows, and the head.

Before he learns the technique of delivering blows, blocking, attacking, and countering, the combatant must learn how to move and correctly assume the fighting stance. Movement and dodging is called *shauntentu ni* by the Burmese. The boxer is supposed to move on his toes, almost identical to the kind of movement seen in Thai or Western boxing. We will not discuss back, front, and rear shuffling in detail here since these are things you can only learn by regularly practicing in a gym. It is most important that the boxer learns to move naturally and without difficulty in all directions so that he is able to evade, retreat, and attack during combat. There are no fancy postures here such as "cat" or "crane" stance.

In Figures 23 and 24, the basic stance used by

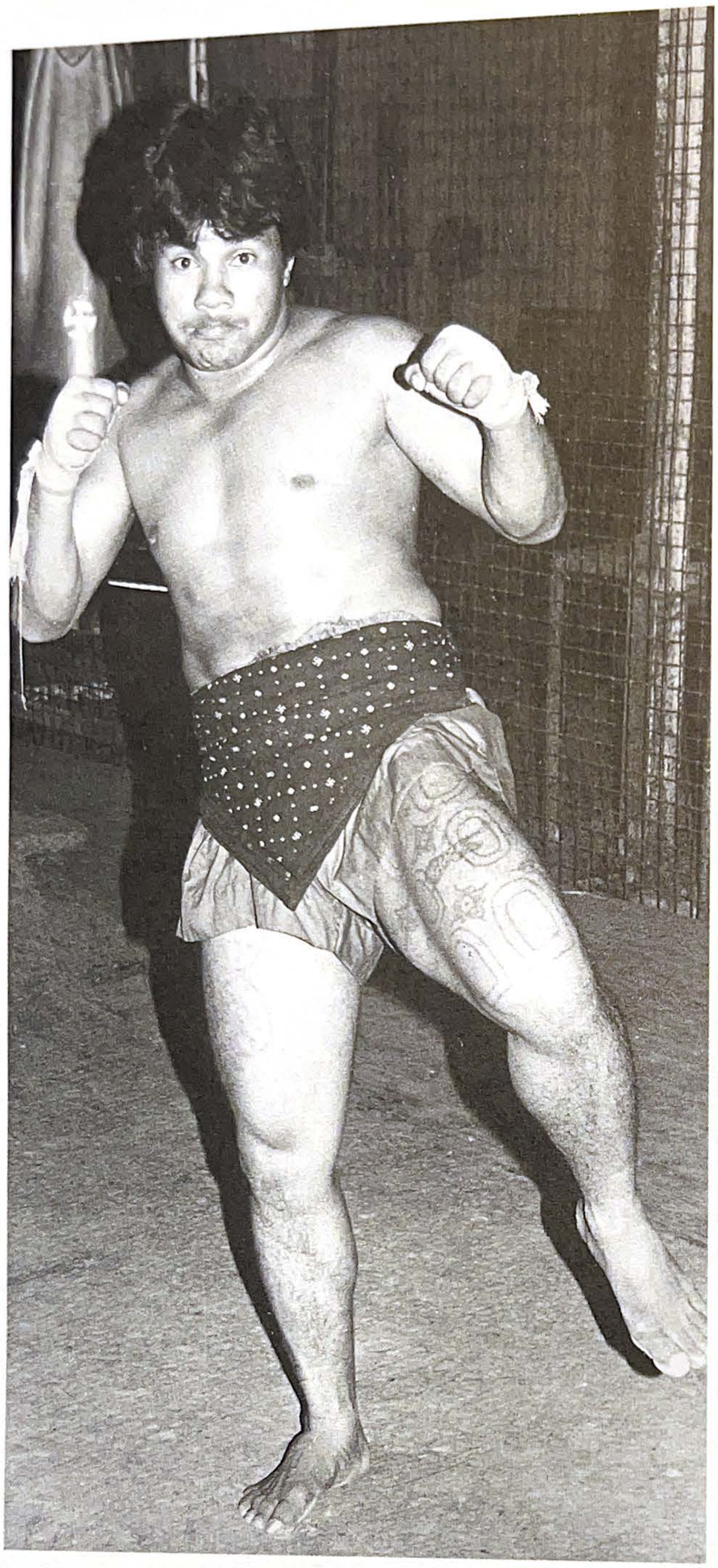


FIGURE 22: Boxers rarely use this stance, as it is purely defensive. The raised leg protects the body from low kicks.

Burmese boxers is shown from two different angles. The fighter has his hands raised in front of his head and his legs are slightly bent at the knee and spread about a foot and a half apart with the center of gravity in the middle of the stance. Weight is equally distributed on both legs, which enables effortless movements in all directions. It also helps the fighter deliver all types of blows and blocks without preparing or changing position. Occasionally one sees a fighter take a position with his front leg temporary raised (Figure 22) with the primary task of protecting the body from low kicks, but since this stance is exclusively defensive boxers rarely use it.

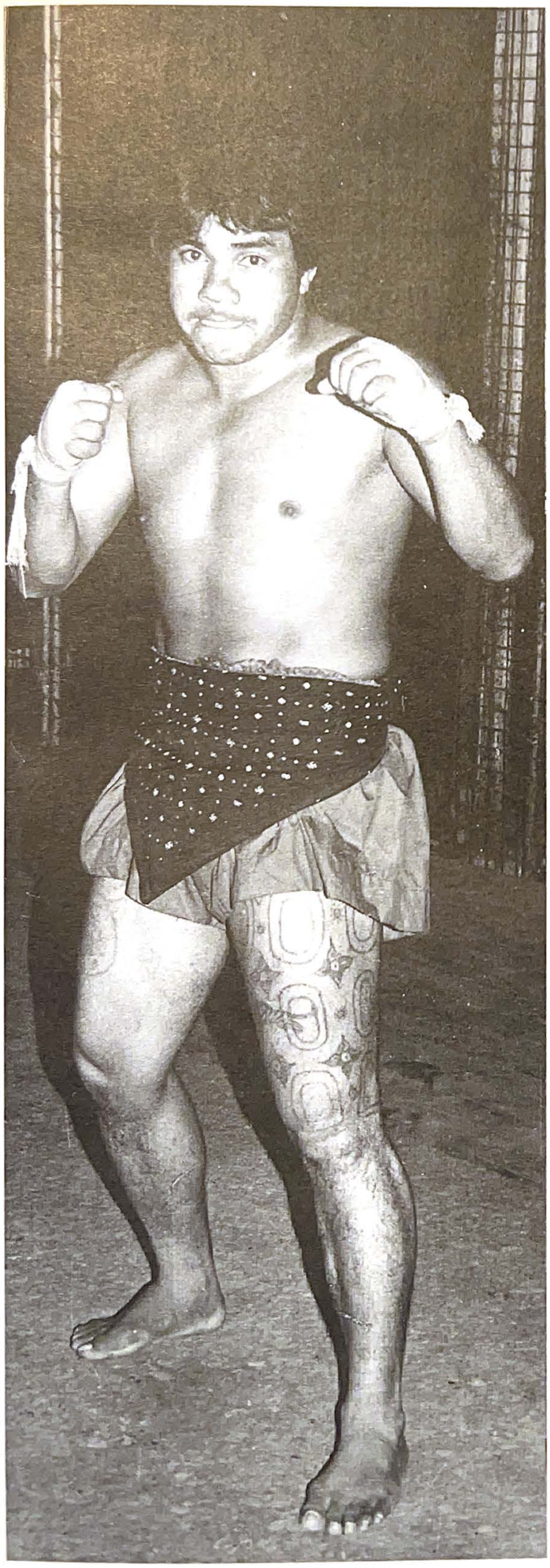
Before beginning each workout, all muscles and joints should be warmed up to help avoid injuries. Running or practicing various gymnastic exercises can offer good warm-ups. Another book this size could be written about warm-up and stretching exercises; the most important factor is that the warm-up includes all the muscles from the neck to the feet. The exercises mustn't be overly strenuous (because the real workout is yet to come), but they must be adequate to make the body begin to sweat a little bit.

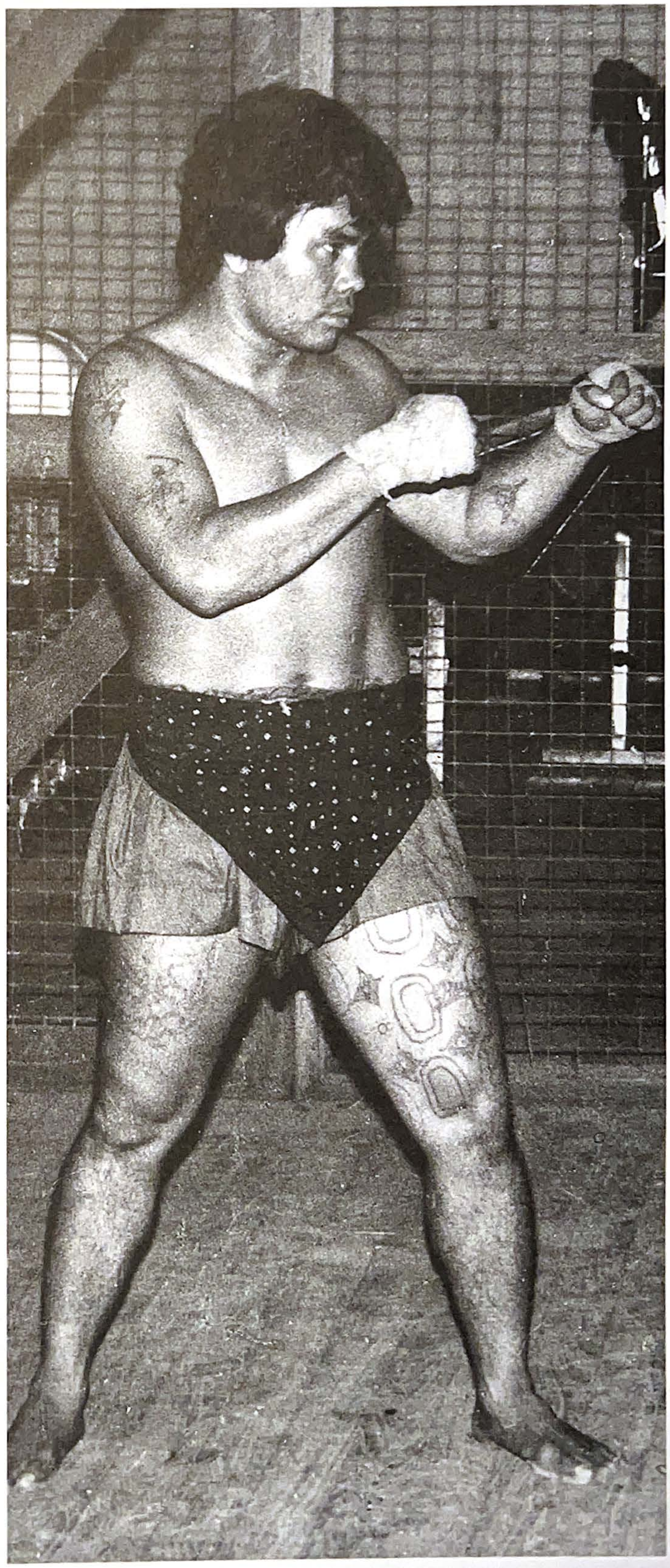
Figures 25 – 29 show a few examples of such exercises. It would be useful to include leg-stretching exercises in your warm-up to avoid problems while executing high kicks such as shown in Figures 28 and 29.

THE FIST (LATT)

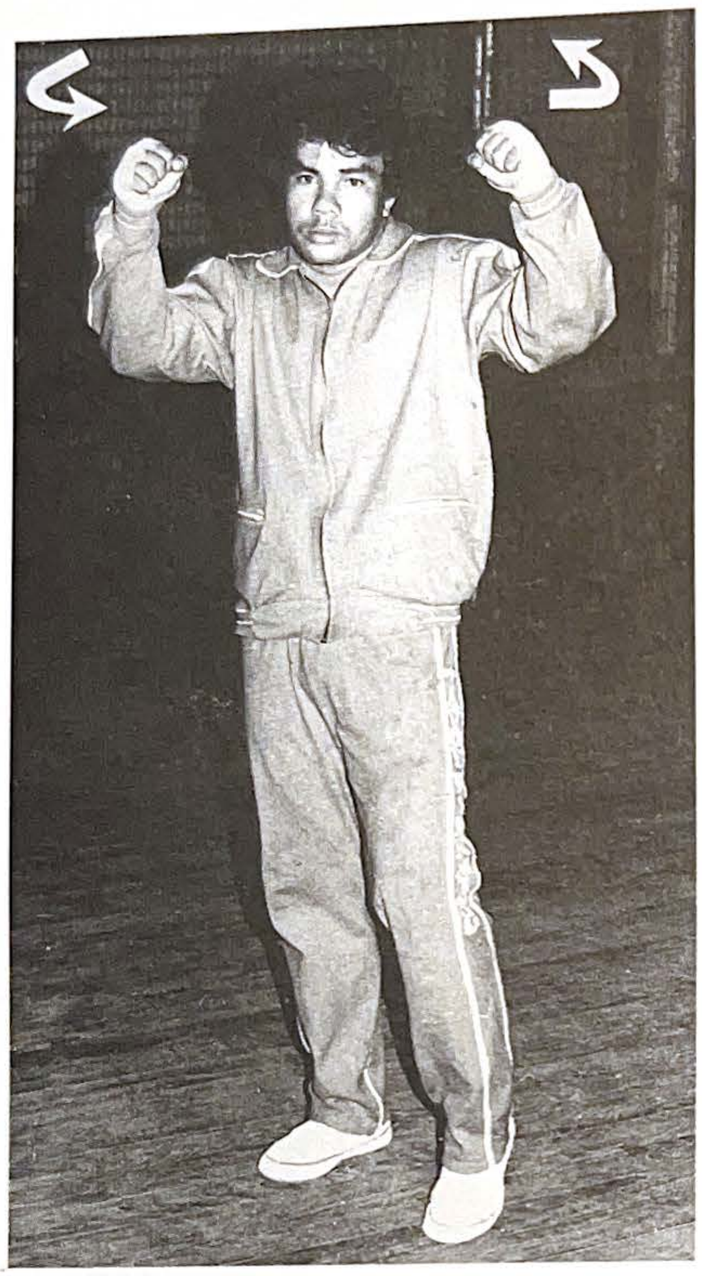
The most basic and important weapon in Burmese traditional boxing is the fist. Many think that it is easy to learn to hit the opponent with the fist, but that's not so. Fist techniques demand great endurance if they are to be properly mastered, and if you do not learn the basic blows and combinations with the fist thoroughly you will be missing the most important part of the skills described in this book. Good punching techniques give self-confidence to the boxer, and only after that stage will he be able to use leg techniques efficiently.

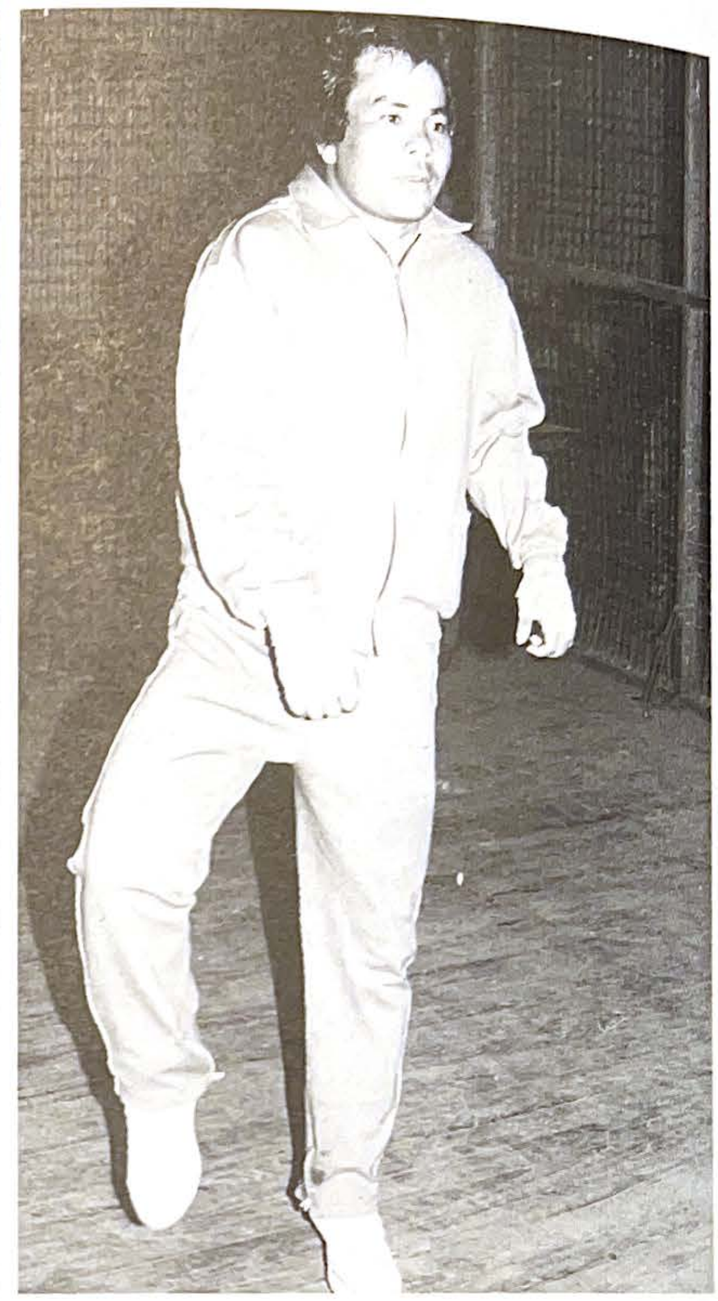
Before we turn to a detailed discussion of various punches, we must learn to wrap

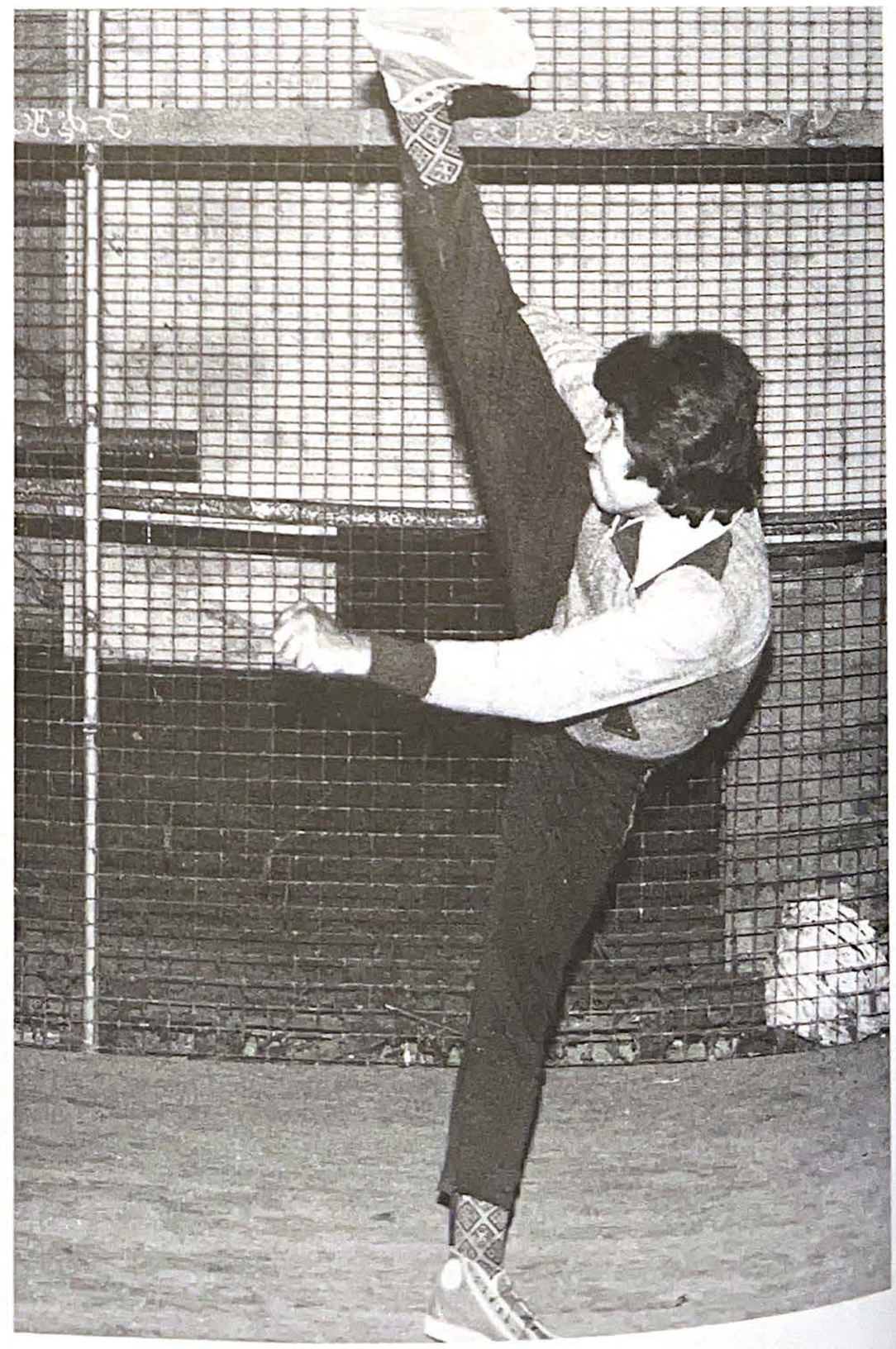




FIGURES 23 AND 24: The basic stance for Burmese boxing is similar to that of Thai boxing.







FIGURES 25 – 29: A few examples of good warm-up exercises.

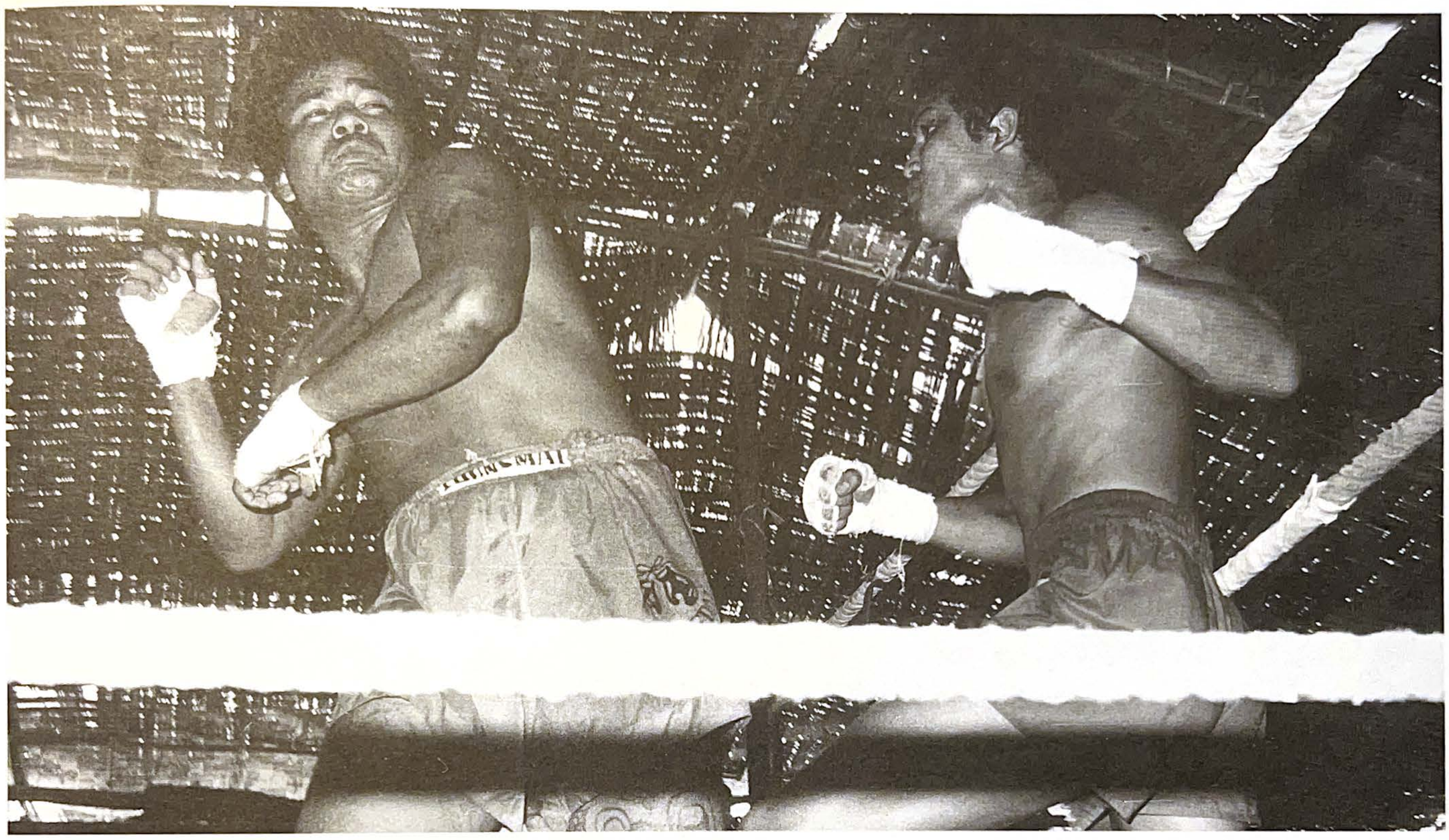


FIGURE 30: Tremendous power can be generated with the swing, or hook punch.

FIGURES 31 – 33: Wrapping bandages (patti) properly can help prevent injury.

bandages (*patti*) around the fists. It is important, especially in the early phases of training, to wear bandages regularly during workouts and fights to protect the bones of the hand from injuries that can be caused by anything from an improperly clenched fist to an incorrectly thrown punch. These are actually ordinary bandages that you can find in the nearest martial arts shop; they are 4 to 7 feet long with a thumb slit at one end. The bandage is first wrapped around the wrist, then the fist, slipped between each of the fingers in the process. Follow Figures 31, 32, and 33 to get an idea of the wrapping pattern.

Straight Punch

The straight punch (*pyon latt di*) is a punch in which the fist moves toward its target in a straight line. From a basic stance you can execute the leading straight or reverse straight punch; these two punches are usually delivered in a series (Figure 35 or Figures 56 and 57). The execution is exactly the same as in Western boxing.

The primary hitting surface is the first two knuckles of the fist. Beginners most often make the mistake of trying to punch with only the strength of their arm muscles, but the movement of the arm is inseparable from the rotation of the body and hips. With proper body movement, the punch builds up much more power and if delivered correctly can be quite damaging (Figure 34). A quick look at how a boxer executes punches against bag or pads can tell you to which level of performance he belongs. If he is relaxed and continuous in performing combinations, that's good; if you see a lot of contraction and separated punches, he needs improvement in his technique.

When punching, it is important to exhale forcefully from the lower part of the lungs by tightening the stomach muscles, producing a hissing sound. Immediately after the contraction, the muscles relax to prepare for the next blow, so it must be done in fraction of second. Make sure that when the punch reaches its target, your fist is in line with your opponent's nose. Many beginners hit too far to the left or right, weakening the force of the punch.

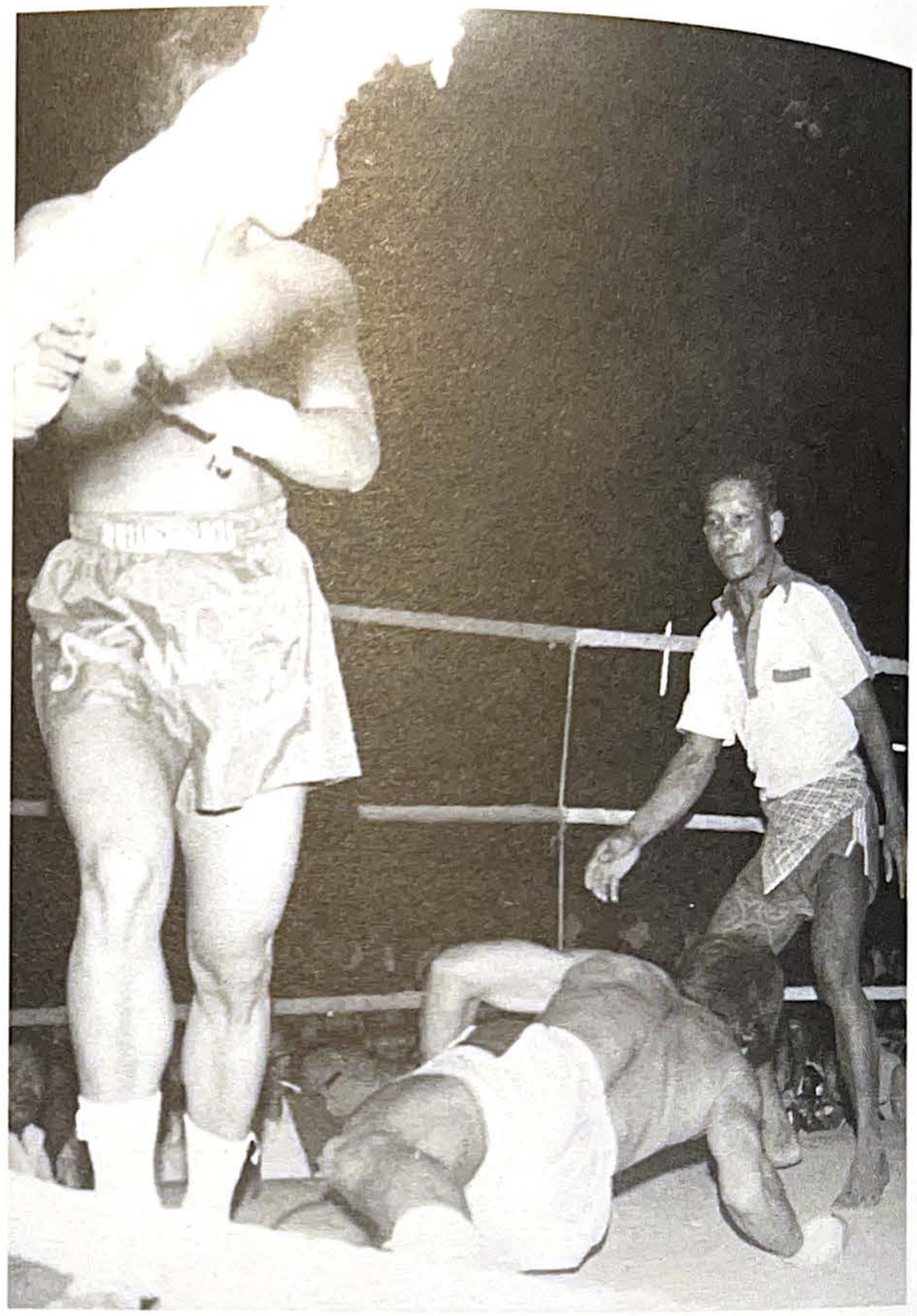


FIGURE 34: A well-executed straight punch can produce a knockout.

Swing Punch

The swing, or hook punch (*wai latt di*), arrives at the target with a semicircular motion. Much like a straight punch, its force is generated by the rotation of the body. Tremendous power can be generated in such a punch, with devastating effects (Figures 30 and 38). When delivering this punch it is important that the body's weight be mostly focused on the toes and that the legs be slightly bent at the knees (Figure 37). In this way, the strength of the punch comes from the legs that shift the center of balance from left to right or vice versa. We can conclude, therefore, that the secret of a powerful punch lies in proper and complete use of the whole body's strength, not merely from the strength of the arm muscles. Here lies the deeper meaning of training in martial arts that gives you ability to win over stronger opponents. The range of the swing punch is, obviously, shorter than the straight punch, so this punch, combined with the uppercut (discussed later), is usually used in closing or when exchanging punches in close-range fighting.

The swing punch can be combined with all other punching techniques; it is recommended, however, that fighters start the combination with

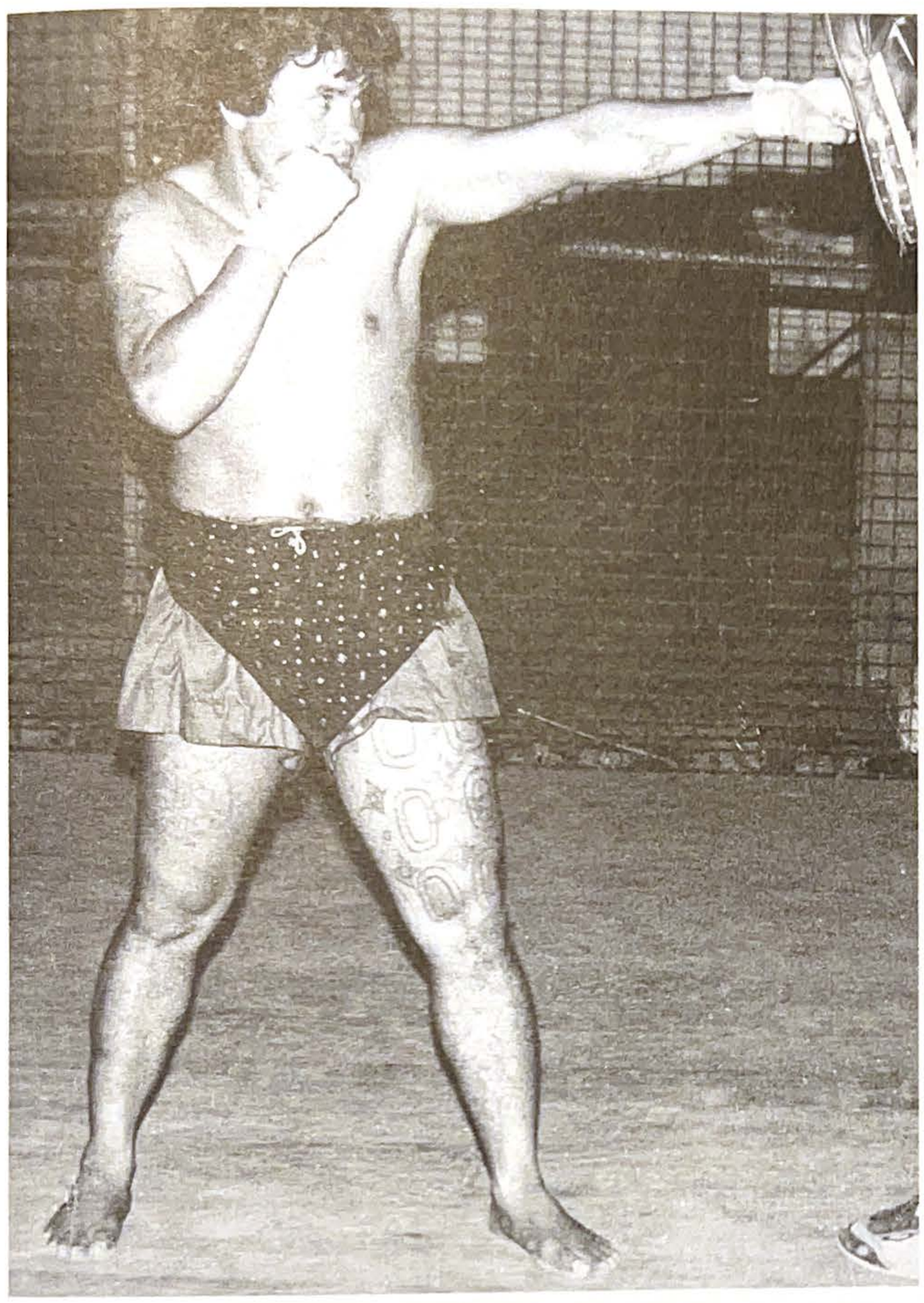


FIGURE 35: Executing the jab. Notice the position of the right hand, which protects the back of your head.

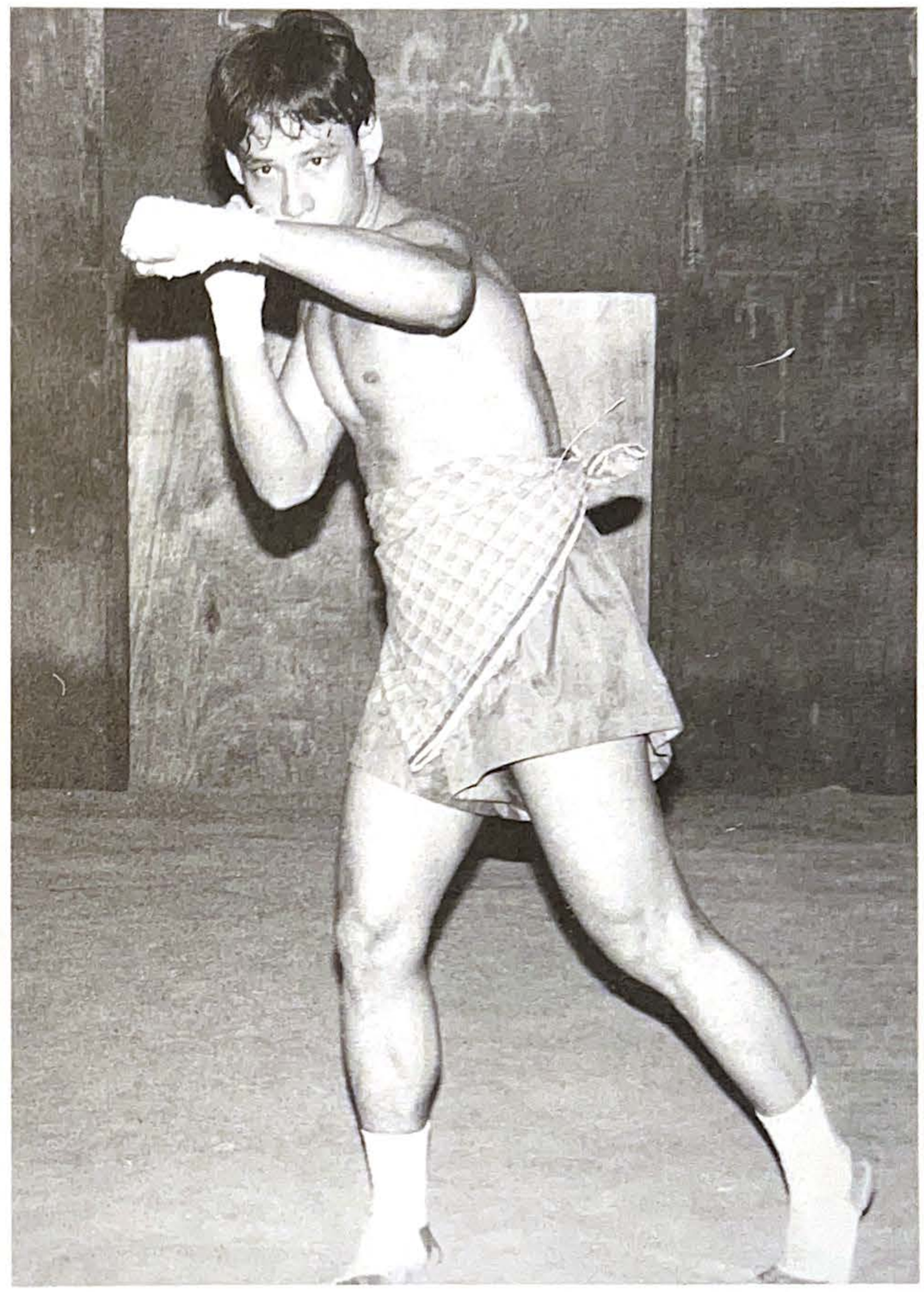


FIGURE 37: A left swing punch.

FIGURE 36: Total war in the ring.

FIGURE 38: A great finale bout in Rangoon.
Tamandja-Tiger (left) evades a punch from Pahne the Giant.

straight lead punches and then approach the opponent using the swings and uppercuts. The basic difference between the swing punch and the straight punch, besides its circular path, is the position of the arm when delivering the blow. In the straight punch the elbow is stretched, while during the swing punch, the elbow is bent at a roughly 90-degree angle. The punch begins and ends with an almost equally bent arm. Aside from

FIGURE 39: The back fist punch is usually delivered with a spin.

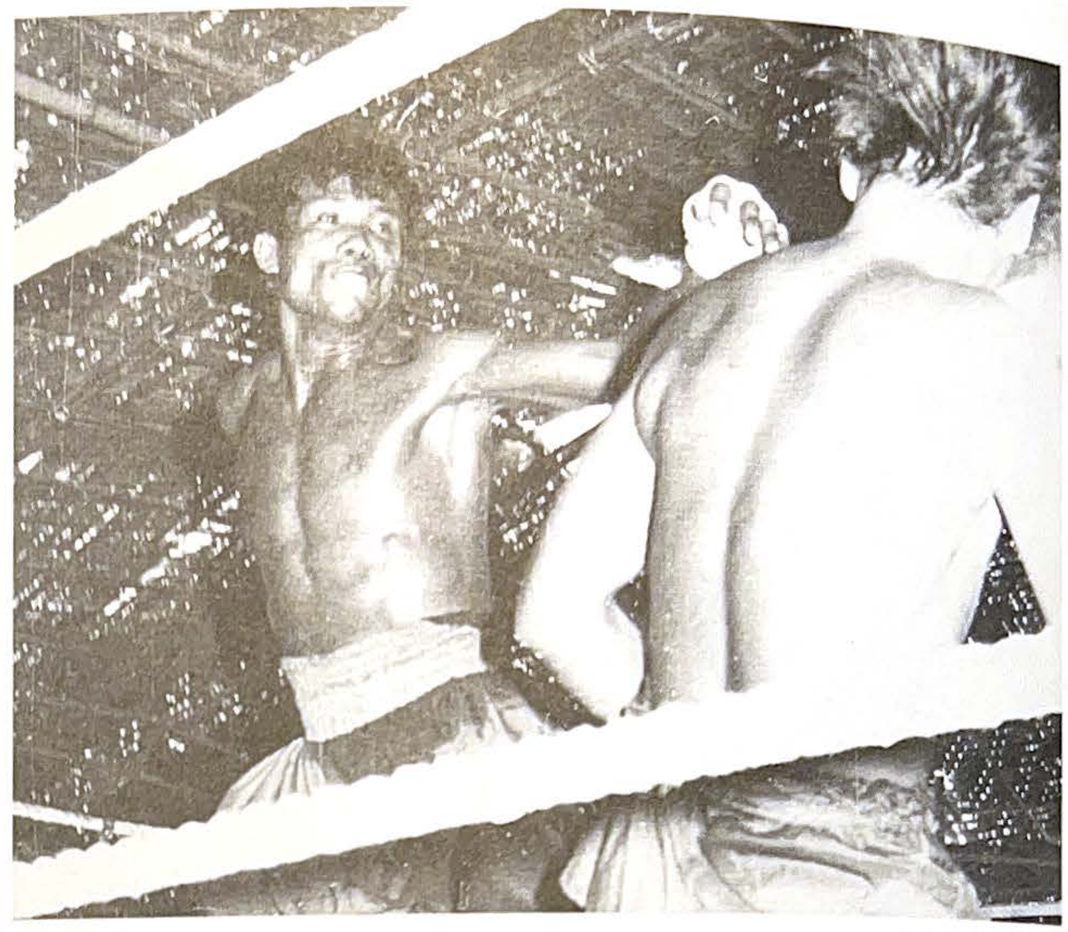


FIGURE 40: The back fist in competition.

the rotational component, there is a raising component in this blow as well. Only when the fist reaches its target does it reach its highest point.

Boxers often use the swing by first ducking and then straightening up, suddenly delivering the punch. After that they can evade by ducking again and delivering a new punch with the other hand.

Back Fist

The back fist (*nepya ni wai da*) shown in Figures 39 and 40—much like the uraken technique in karate—is delivered with the first two knuckles, but unlike the straight punch you must rotate the fist to the side. The Burmese are true specialists in delivering this punch with a spin, and the full rotation of the body and hips increases the force of the punch with the effect of a spinning top. Although this blow can never attain the force of a straight punch or a swing, it is nonetheless a useful move in various fighting combinations, particularly as a counterpunch.

Uppercut

The uppercut (*pin latt di*) shown in Figure 41 is intended exclusively for close-quarter combat. The fundamental targets are the opponent's jaw, solar plexus, and ribs. The

punch moves upward toward the goal, with the hand bent at the elbow much as it is in the swing punch. The rotation of the body and hips and the position of the feet are all similar to that of the swing punch stance. The uppercut is easiest to practice on pads. It should not be attempted until you have mastered the straight punch and the swing. It is less important as a weapon in close-quarter combat than, for example, the elbow or knees.

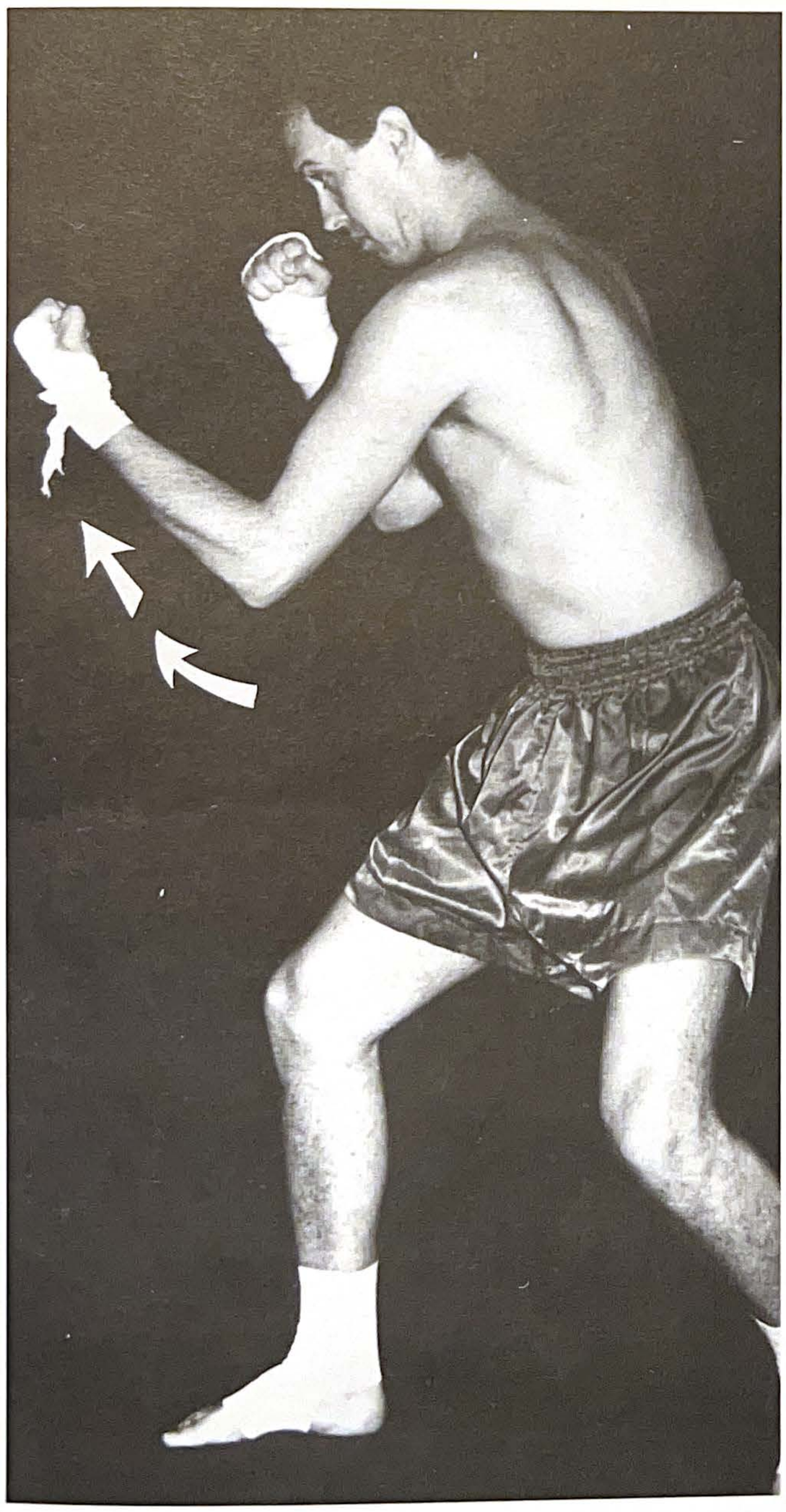


FIGURE 41: The upward path of the uppercut must be followed by a body shift to the front leg.

The uppercut can be easily combined with the swings, and this natural combination can be extended to 10 punches or more. While executing such combinations the boxer must be aware of the possibility of grappling with the opponent, who can counter with knees or elbows. That is the reason why the uppercut is not as widely used in Burmese boxing as it is in Western boxing.

THE ELBOW (D'TAO)

The elbow strike is more powerful than any of the fist punches, but due to its relatively short range it is only applicable in close-quarters combat. One of the advantages of using the tough surface of the elbow is that you don't have to practice any additional exercises to toughen the hitting surface as are needed when using the fist, knee, or shin.

While the Thai are unparalleled in their mastery of kneeing, the Burmese boxers are the most skilled combatants in Asia with the elbows. They are truly the masters. The skill, precision, and situations used in elbow techniques are simply unbelievable, and for those who have never watched Burmese boxing live, the way they use this dangerous strike is hard to imagine. Many fights end due to injury or knockout (*ehmai*) after elbow smashes.

In the old Burmese books on traditional boxing are the following instructions: "Leap like a tiger, grab the opponent by the neck and hit him with the elbow on the top of the forehead." The boxer uses the unusual (but most effective) technique of actually climbing up the opponent's body using his legs and body as support, and then delivering the elbow strike from this position. This move is seen only in Burma and Thailand.

The spin elbow strike (*d'tao hni payayda*) is an equally popular technique when avoiding the opponent's attack.

FIGURE 43: Exchanging punches is part of every match.

FIGURE 44: The elbow strike is a dangerous weapon.

Of course a combination of agility, speed, and balance is needed for all this, but the section on close-quarters combat will describe these special Burmese moves in greater detail.

The first important lesson is mastery of the three basic elbow strikes:

- downward elbow strike (Figures 45, 46, 52, and 53)
- semicircular elbow strike (Figures 48 – 51)
- jumping elbow strike (Figures 54 and 55)

We also need to mention the upward elbow strike, which is rarely seen in practice, and the back elbow strike (*naupya d'tao*), which we will study more in Chapter 4. As with all strikes, it is important to coordinate the momentum of the whole body with the elbow. Only in this way can the strike be truly powerful, flooring almost any opponent. The Burmese use this strike to smash bricks, which is adequate proof of its force.

The primary targets of the elbow strike are the opponent's head and neck. However, if we force the opponent to lean forward we have the chance to deliver a blow to the back as well. This blow is an ideal weapon in self-defense if we are able to choose a vital vulnerable spot as a target. If we are hitting the head, these are the base of the nose, the top of the forehead, and the temple.

Downward Elbow Strike

When hitting the opponent's back, the strike should be aimed at the spine. When using the downward elbow strike (*d'tao hni taoda*) in the preparatory posture (Figure 45) the fighter should be standing almost upright on tiptoes

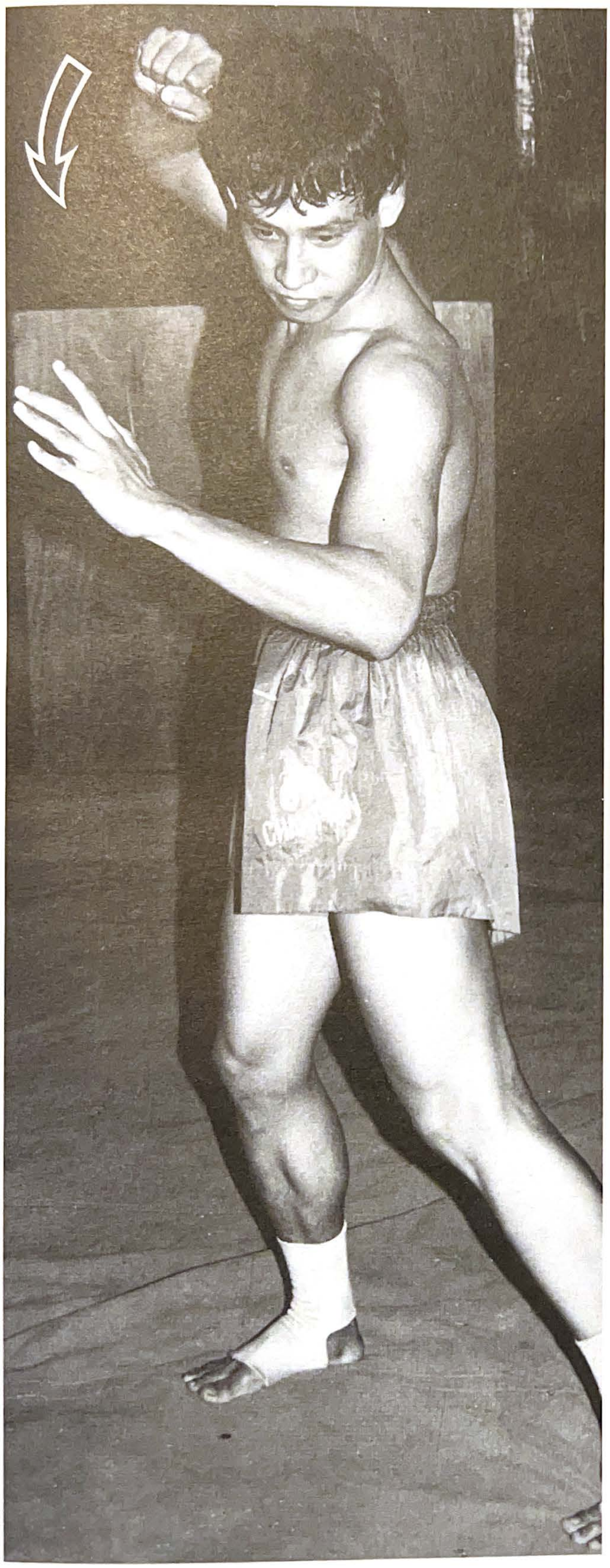
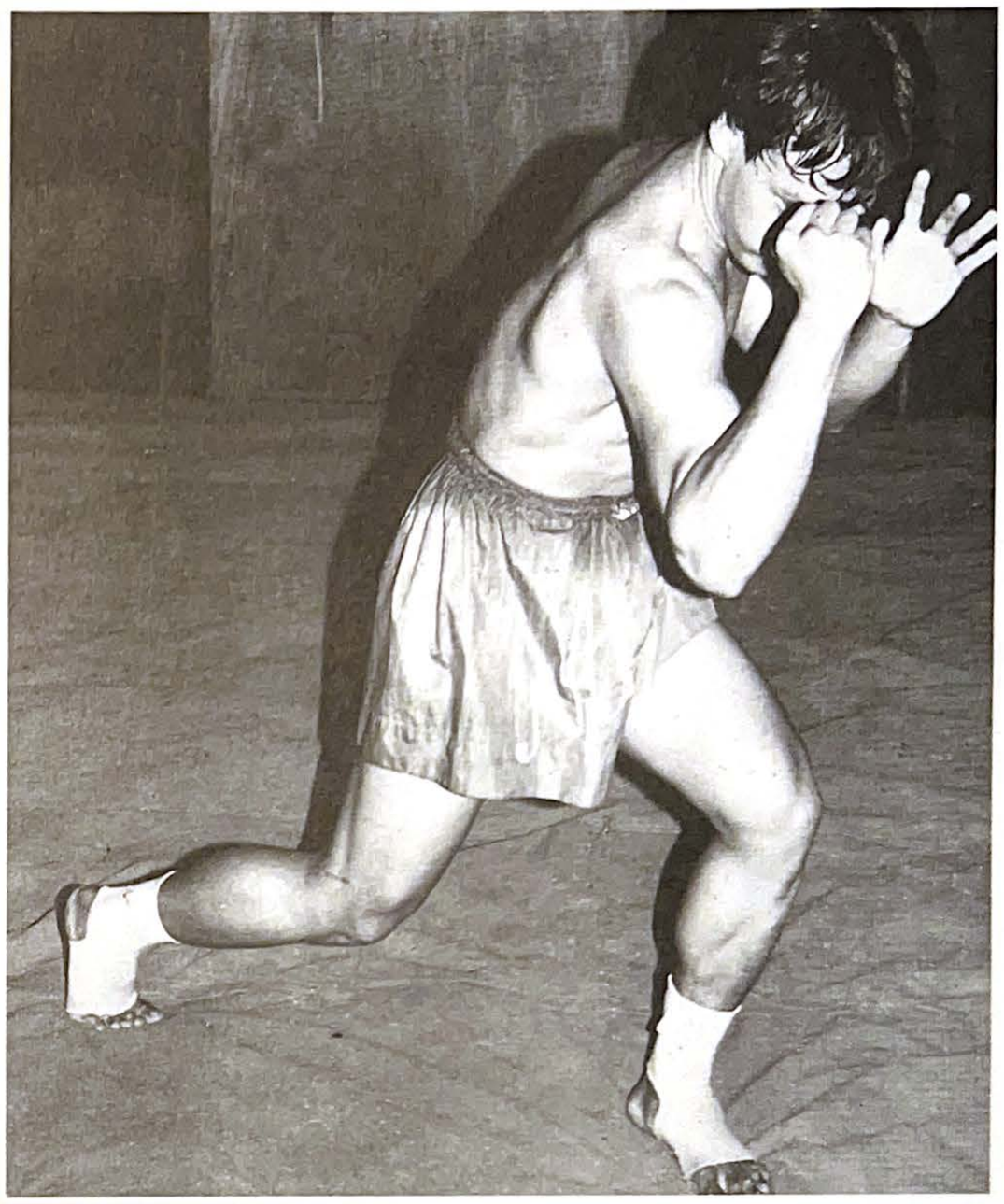


FIGURE 45: Preparing for the downward elbow strike.



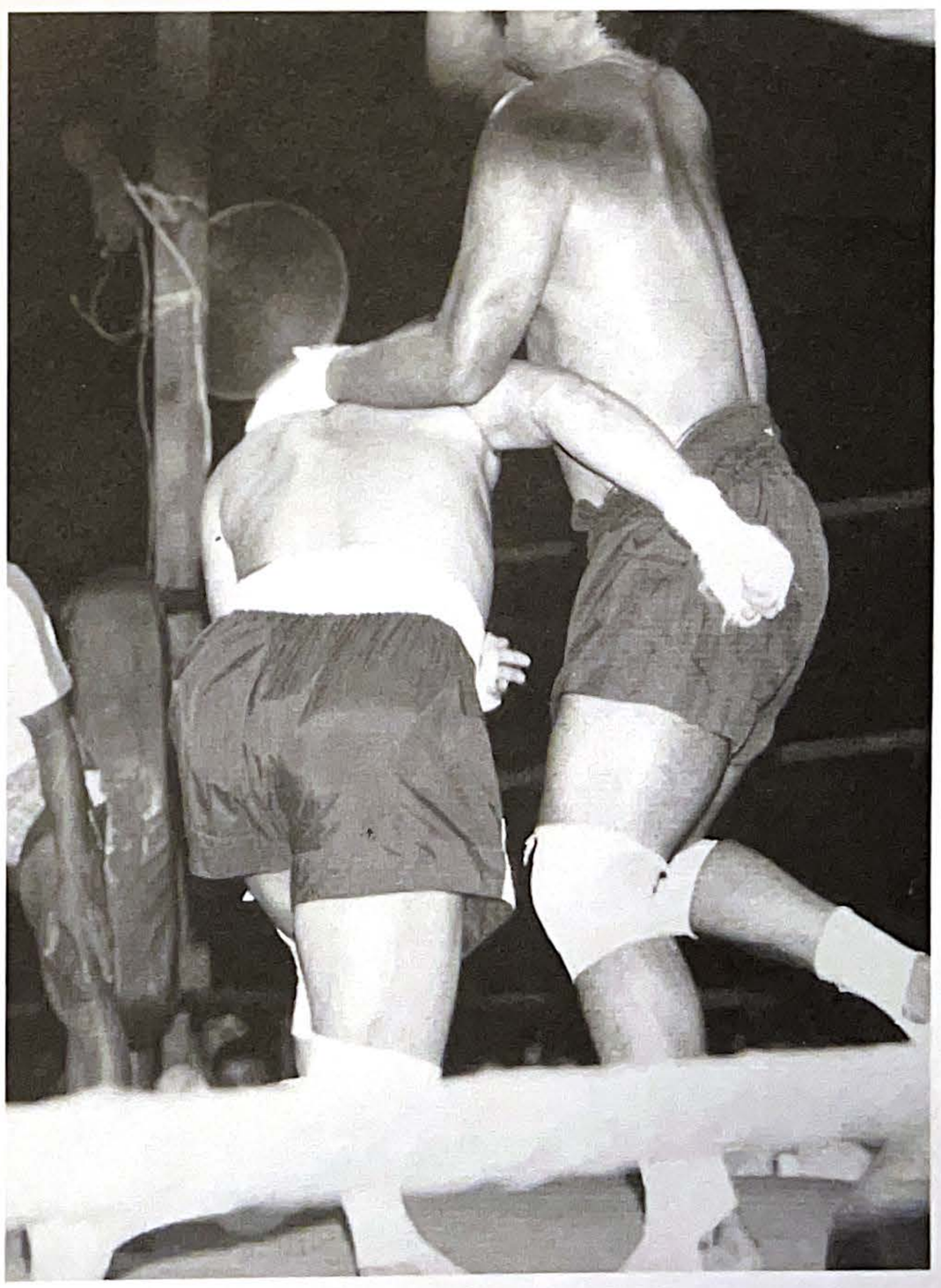
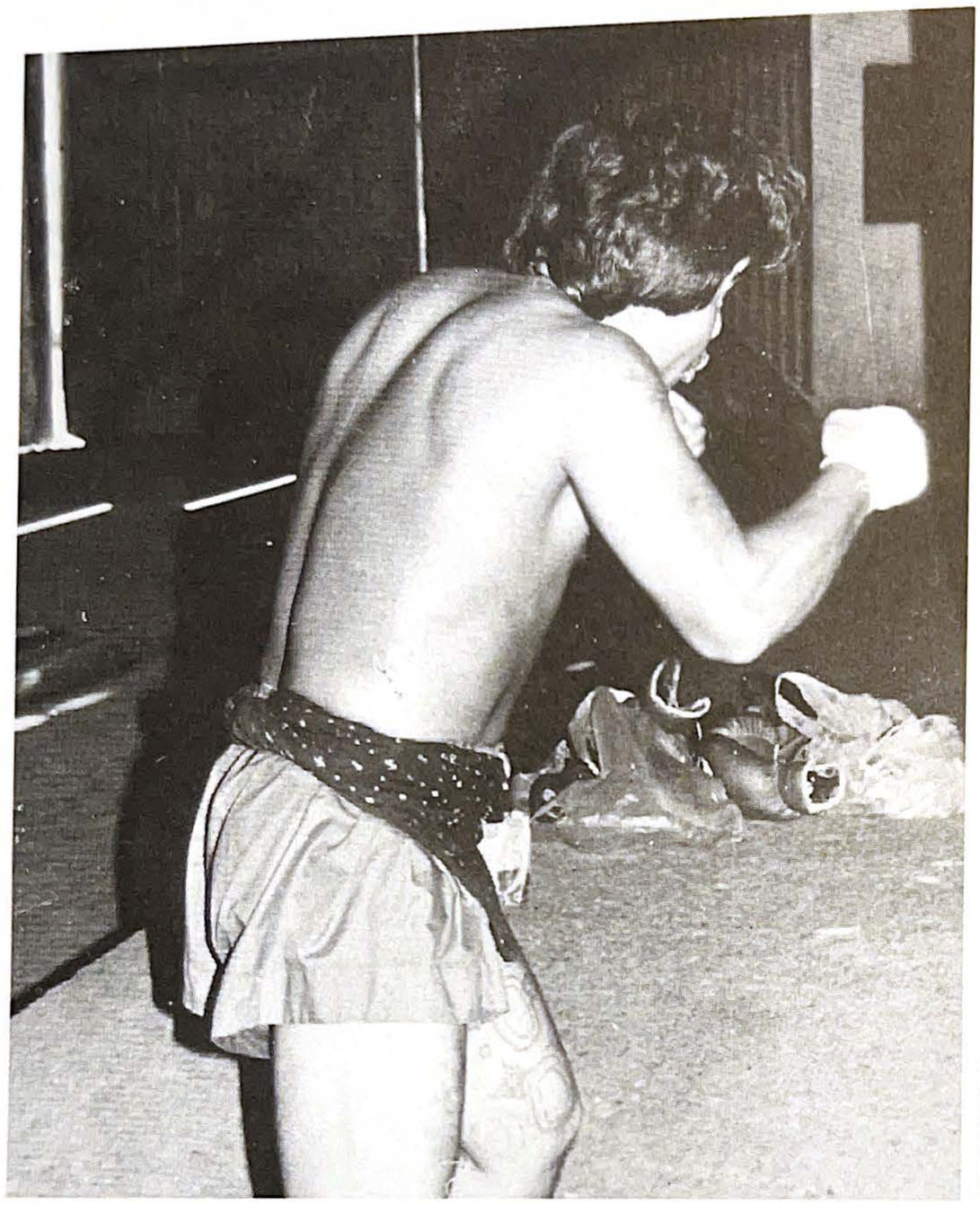
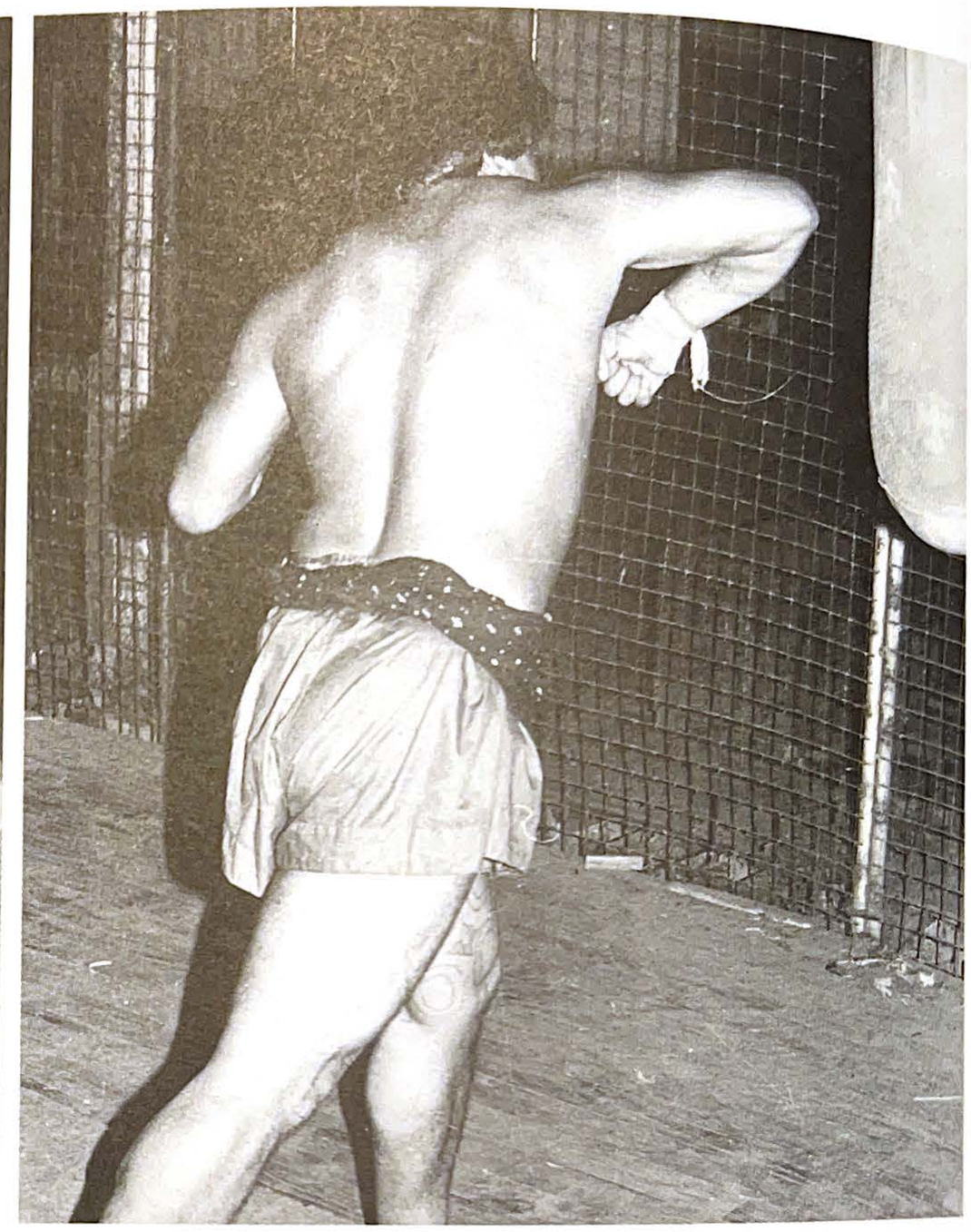
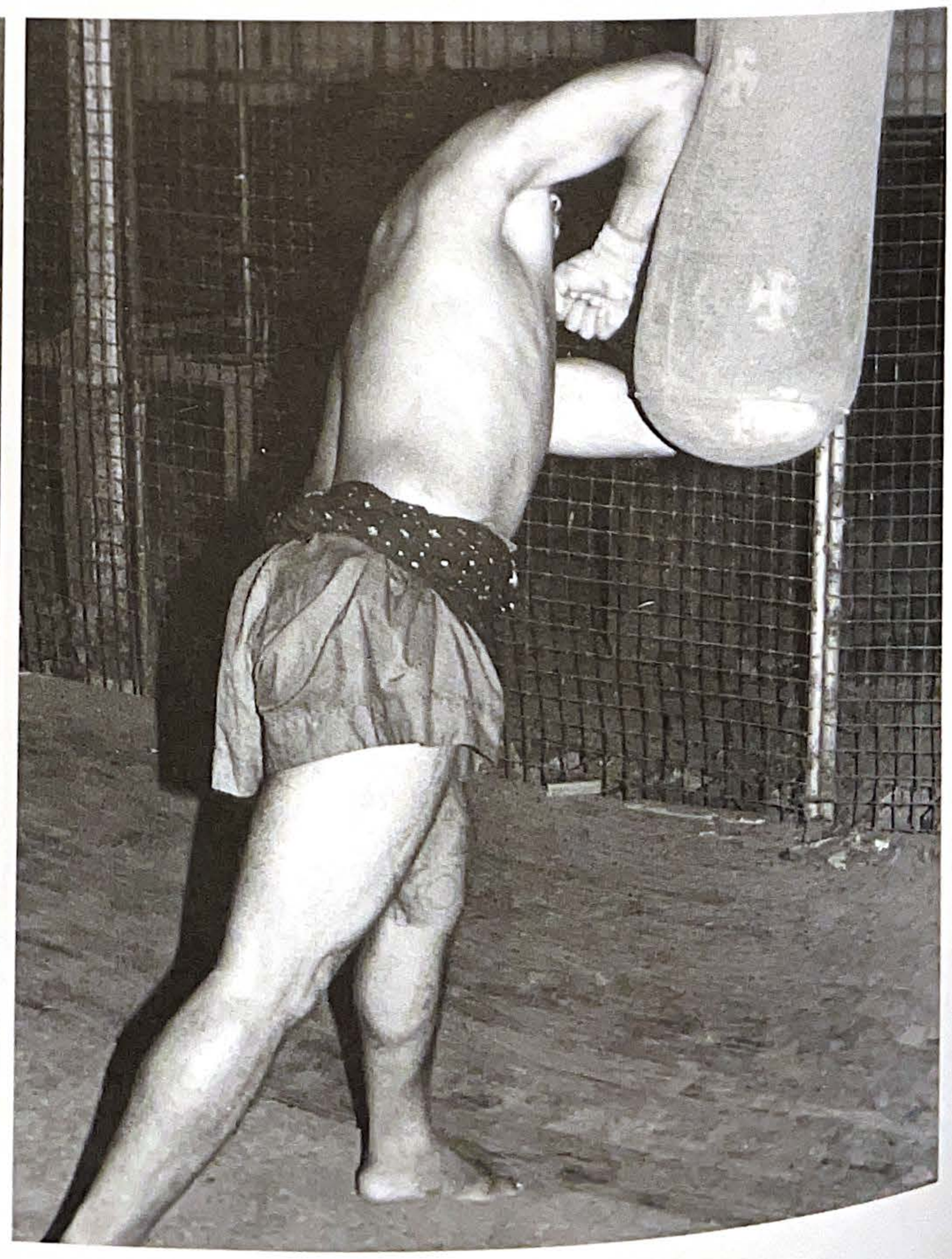


FIGURE 46 (top): The sudden downward movement adds power.
FIGURE 47: The downward elbow strike applied in the ring.

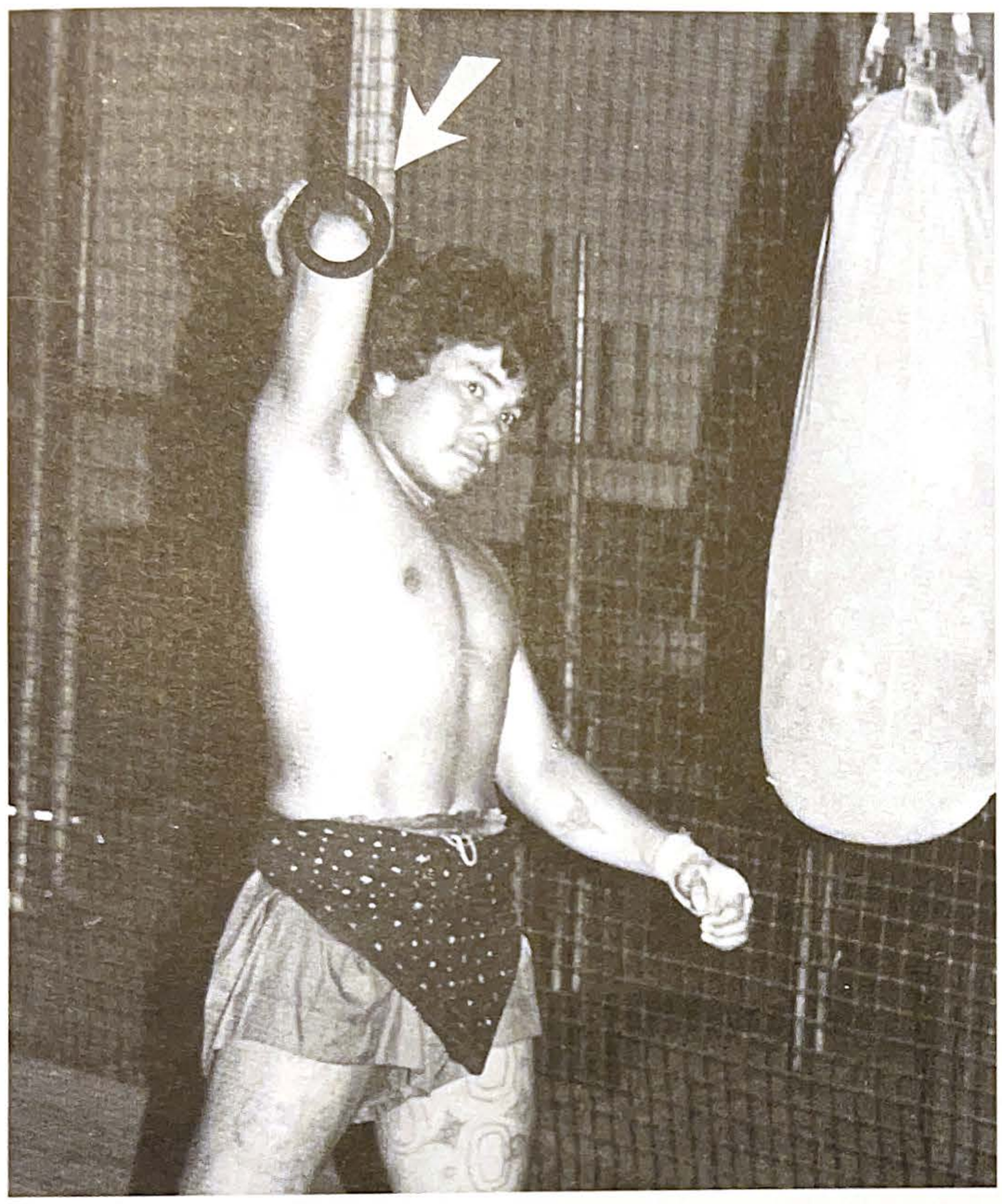


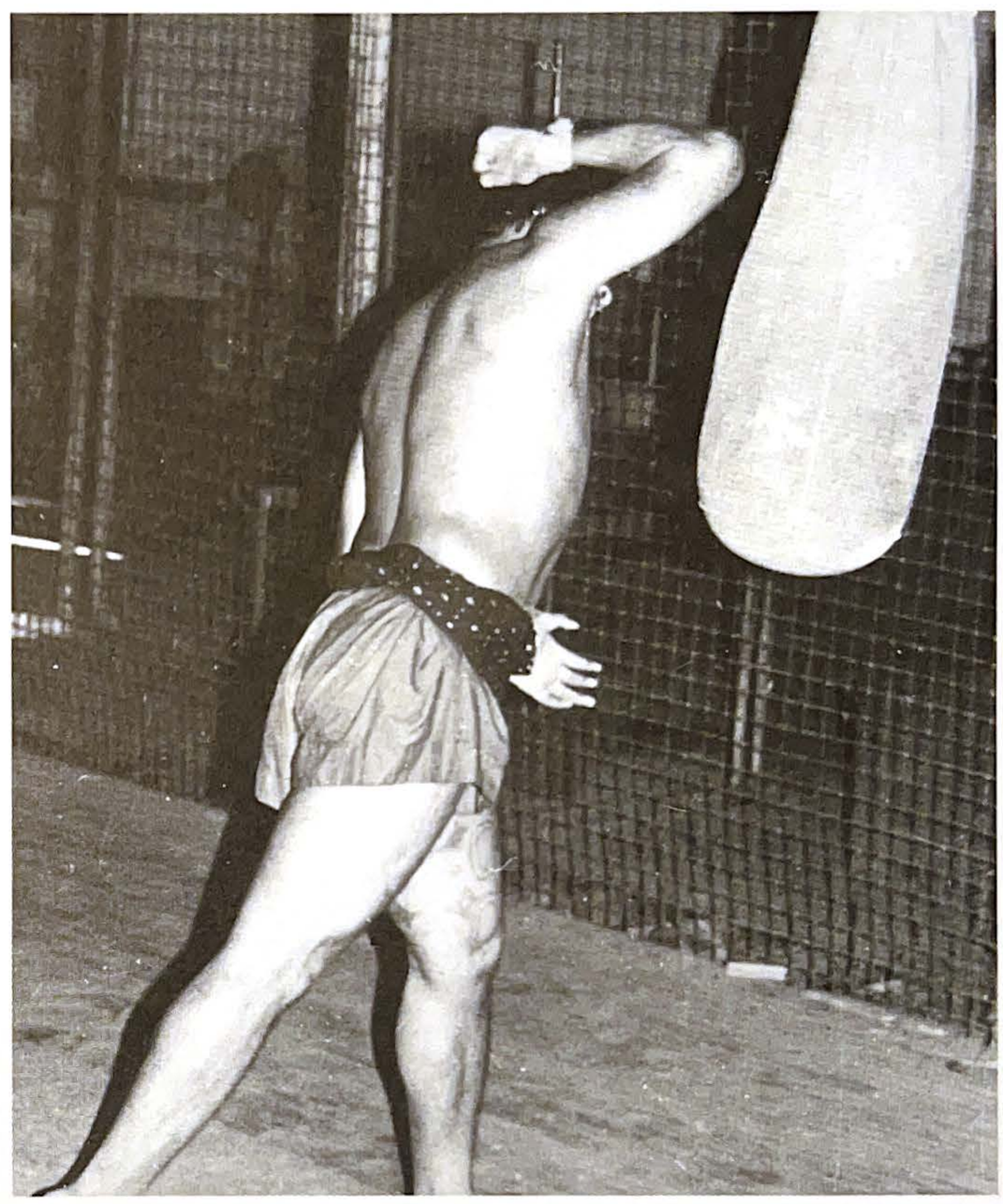


FIGURES 48 AND 49: Executing the semicircular elbow strike.

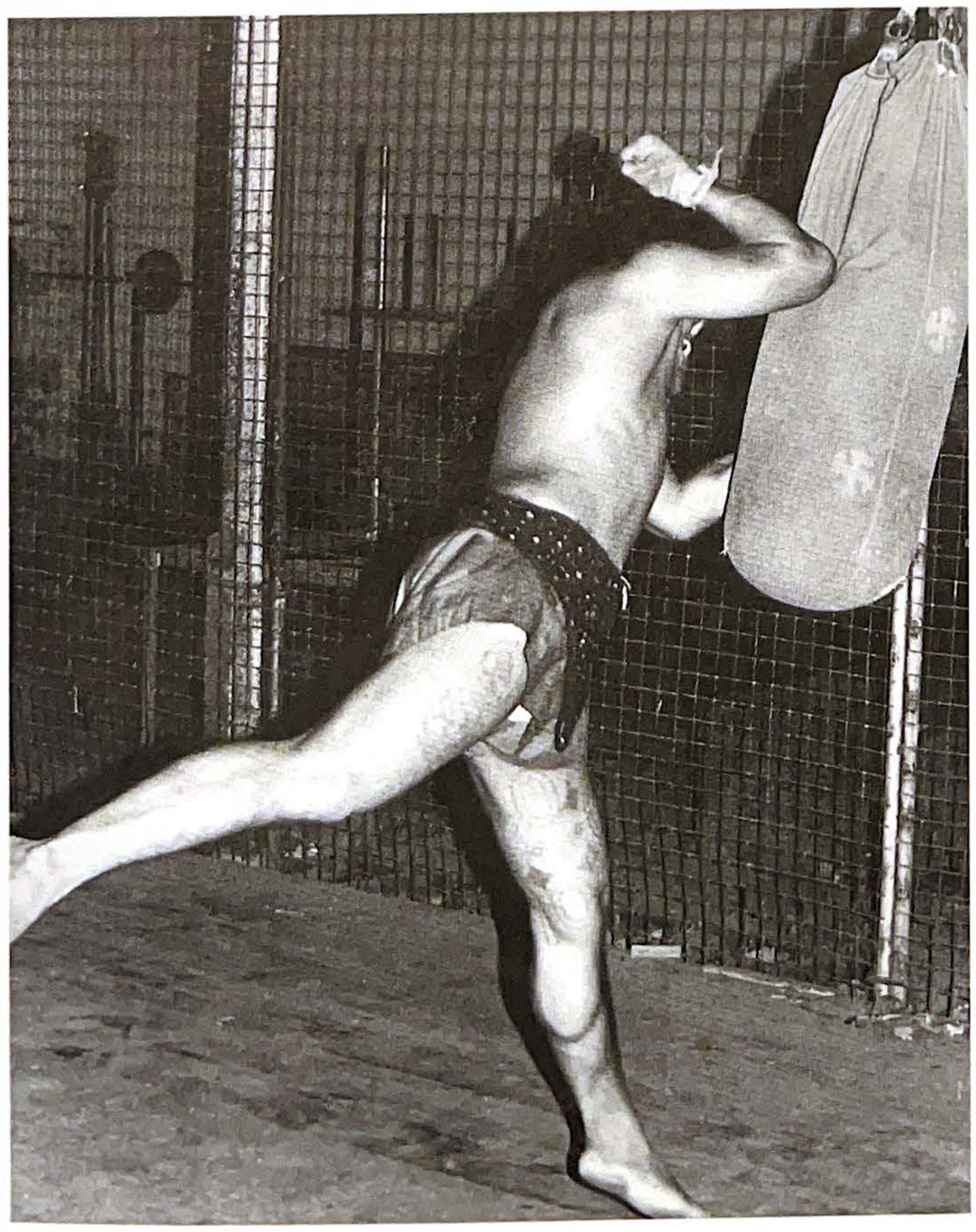


FIGURES 50 AND 51: The semicircular elbow strike in practice and while exercising with the bag.

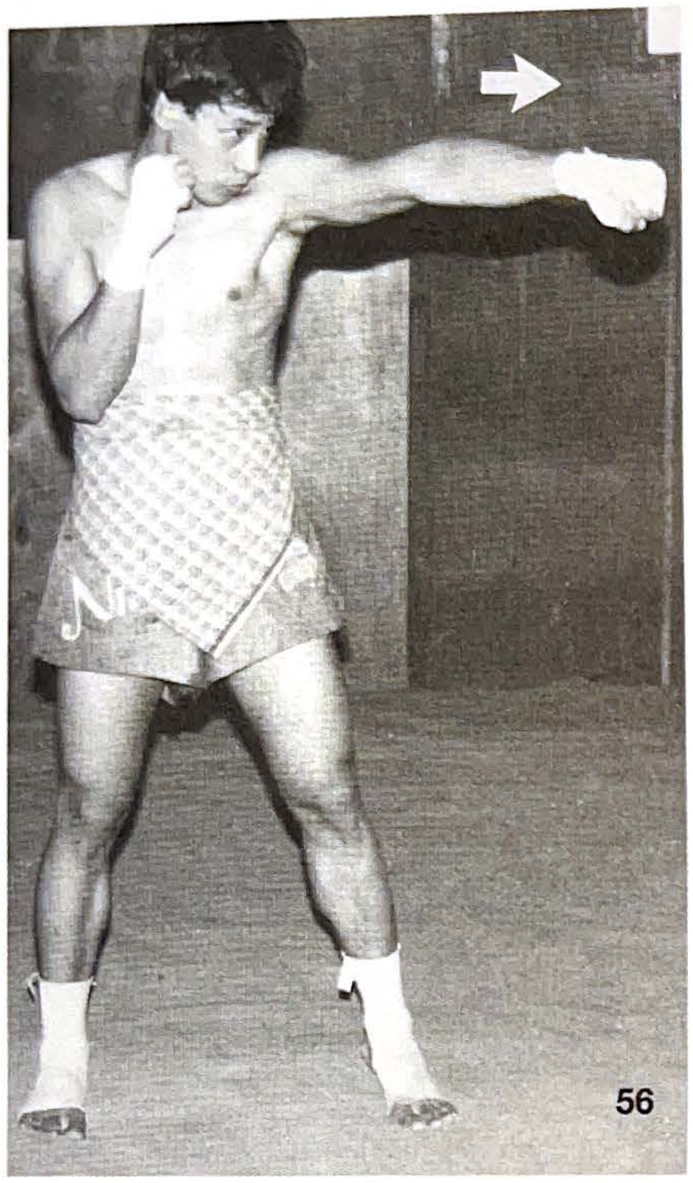


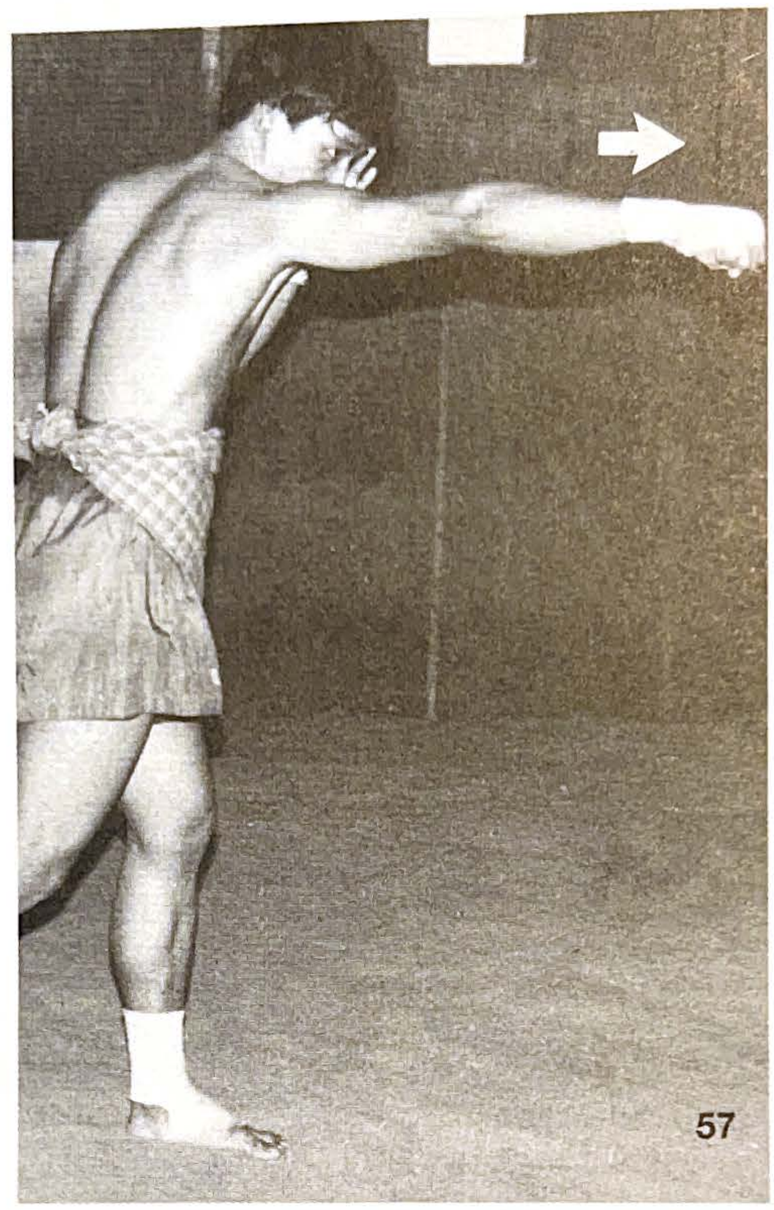


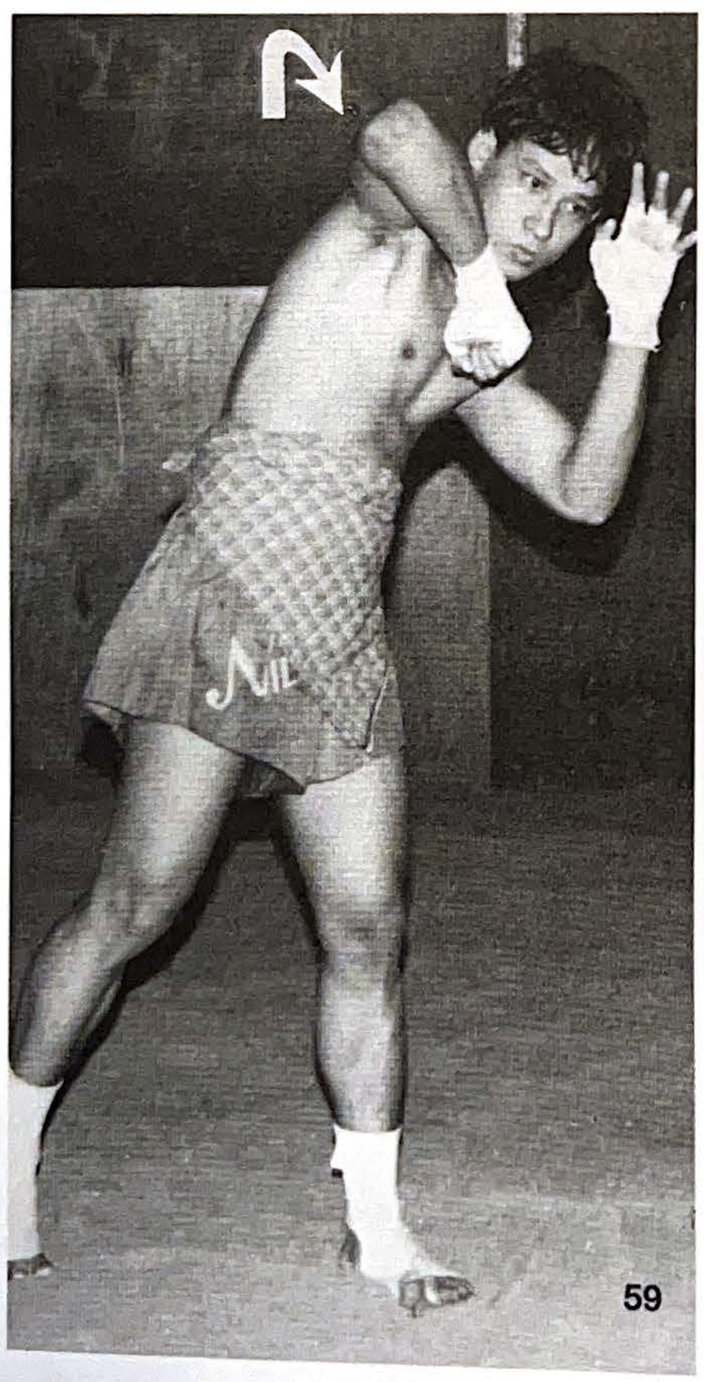
FIGURES 52 AND 53: A fighter practices the downward elbow strike against the bag.

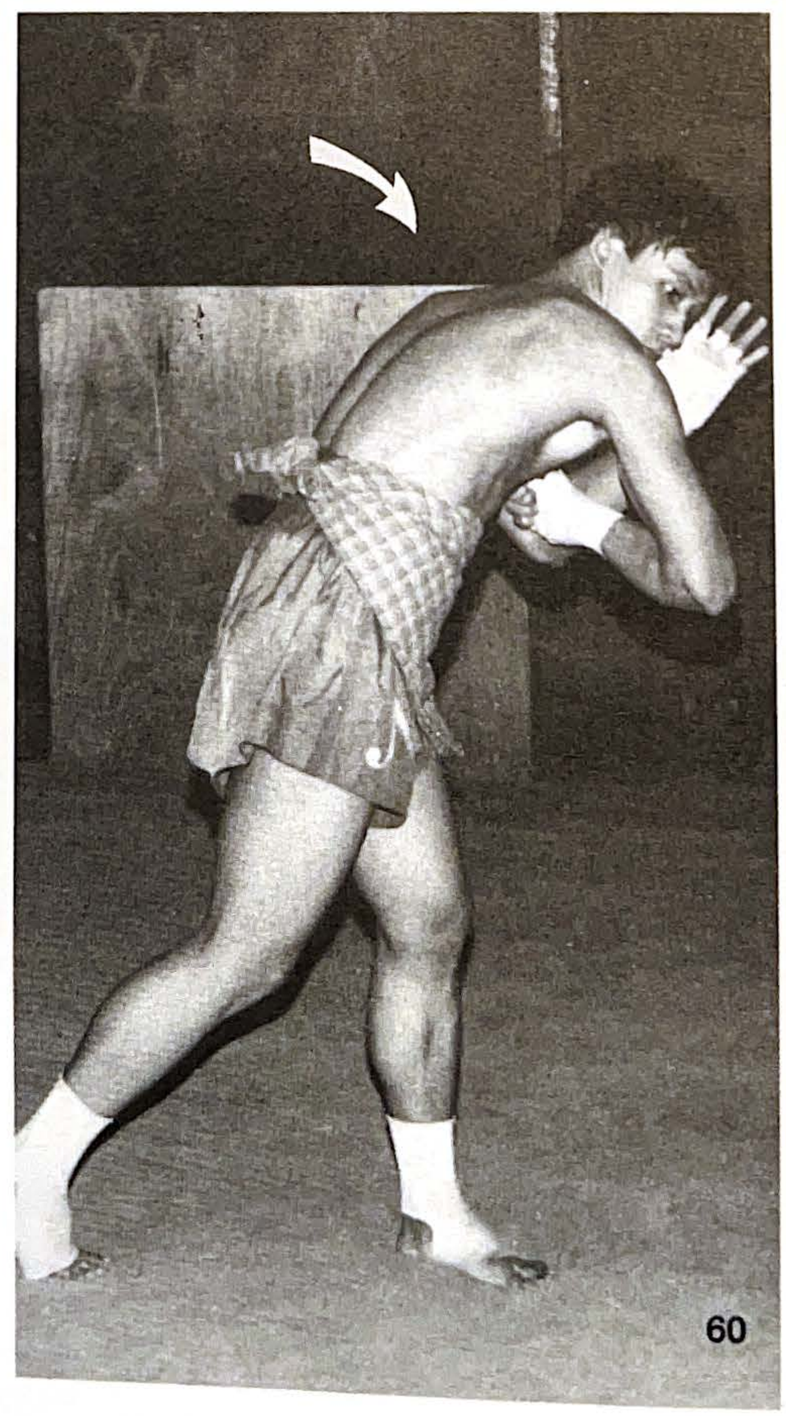


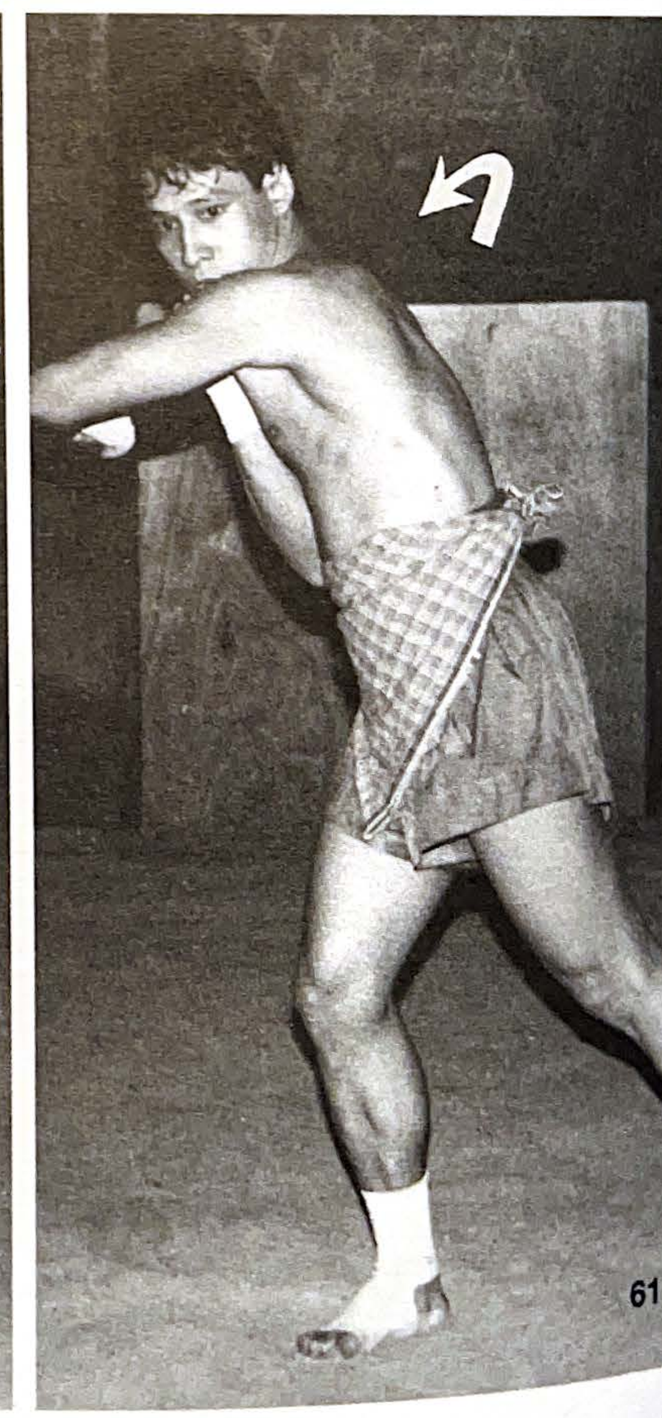
FIGURES 54 AND 55: The jumping elbow strike practiced with the bag and with another fighter.
If you can surprise your opponent with this technique, you can finish the match quickly.











FIGURES 56 – 61: The typical Burmese combination of punches and elbow strikes. Do not perform it statically, but move and shift the center of balance to your left and right.

with elbows raised to head height. The striking hand is clenched in a fist and bent to about a right angle (the other hand can be used to grab the opponent around the neck or protect the head). The sudden downward circular movement (Figure 46), which lowers the fighter's center of gravity, puts the mass of the whole body behind the blow. This strike is shown being practiced on a bag in Figure 54 and applied in the ring in Figure 47.

Semicircular Elbow Strike

In this strike the rotation of first the hips and then the whole body is crucial, giving the strike its force and speed. The fighter begins with a slightly crouched stance, with his legs bent at the knees as if preparing to jump (Figure 48). Then he delivers a lightning-fast blow (Figure 49). If the opponent manages to avoid the strike, there is still a chance that the fighter can deliver a blow in the opposite direction with the same arm, or can turn his body to deliver a left elbow strike. A small forward step with the right leg is then necessary.

The striking elbow descends from above not in a straight line but in a semicircular arc. This is what distinguishes this blow from similar elbow strikes in karate. The practical application and of this strike is shown in Figure 50, while a fighter practices with the bag in Figure 51.

Jumping Elbow Strike

The jumping elbow strike (*koun d'tao hni taoda*) is a technique useful for catching the opponent off guard, and speed is crucial. While in the air you must grab the opponent around the neck (near the nape) while delivering the strike with the other arm (Figure 55). This strike should be practiced with the bag as well, combining it with other techniques (Figure 54).

Training

The essence of learning is repetition and combination. The strikes must be practiced so they are delivered automatically. This can only be achieved through constant repetition of the techniques—hundreds of times during each training session.

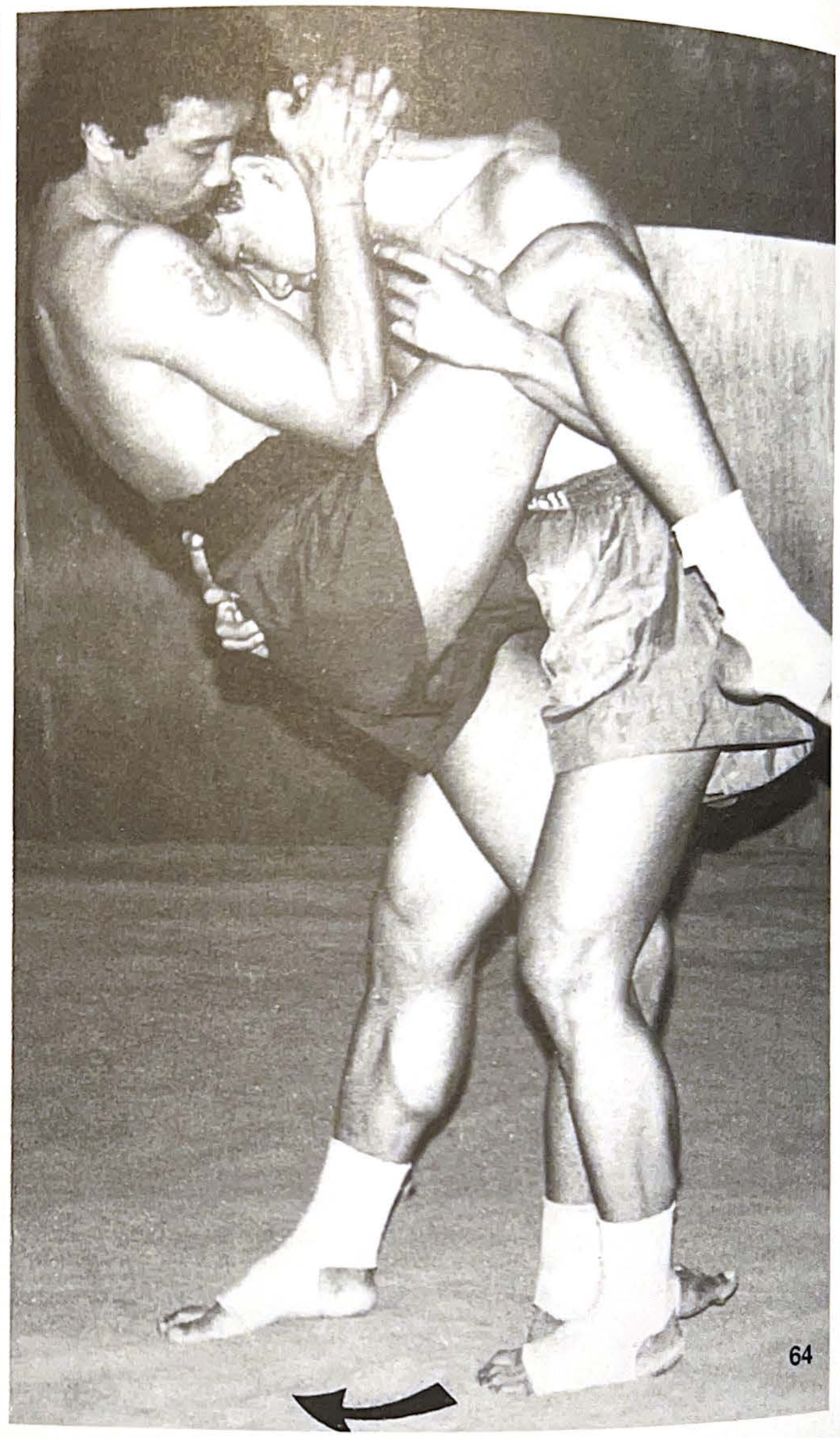
At first the techniques and combinations are done slowly; attention is directed exclusively to following the proper path and delivery. Then the student learns to connect the moves in combination. It is important to learn the proper techniques before adding speed.

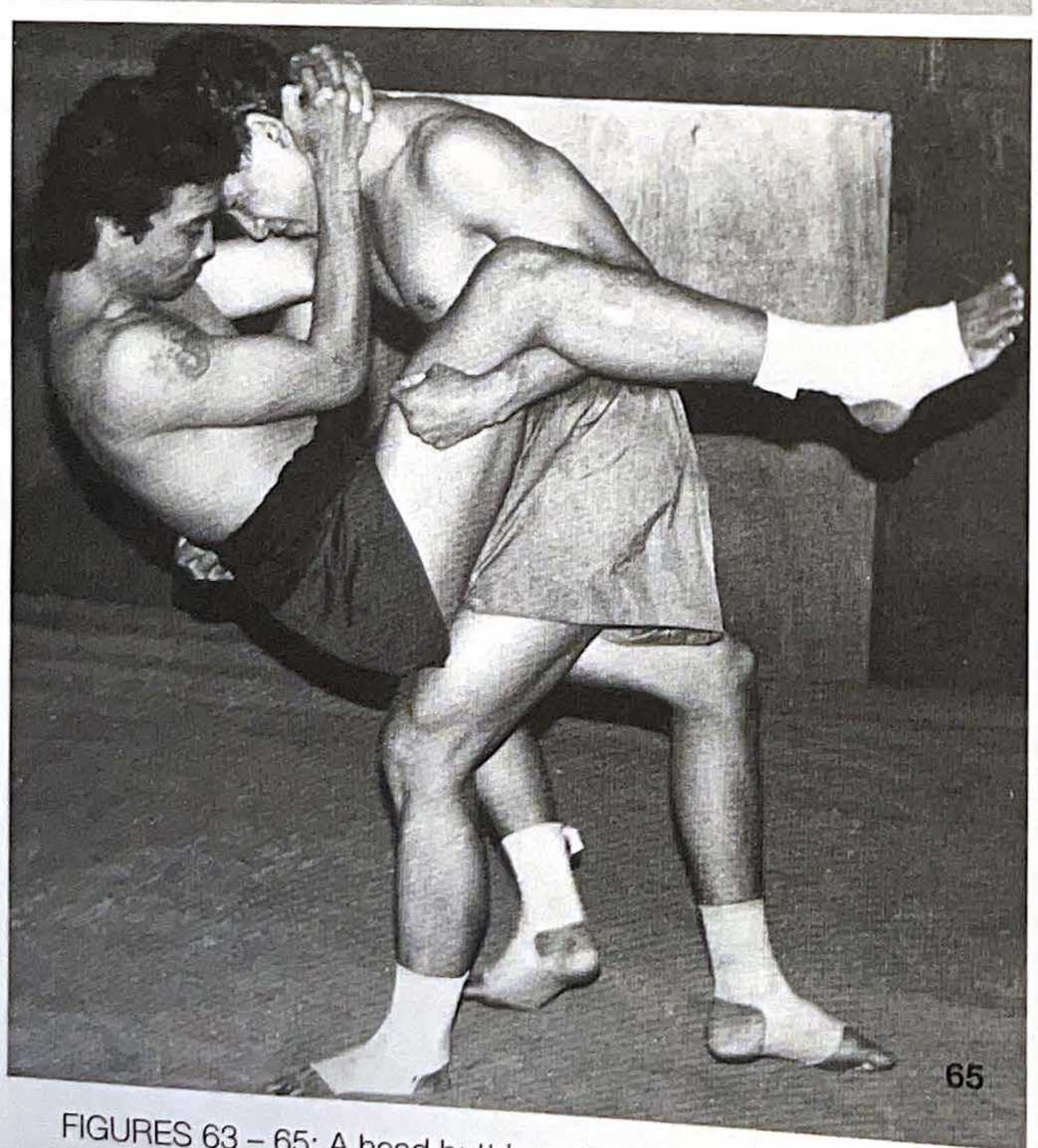
When the student can deliver a combination with full speed, without thinking or making mistakes, then the combination is completely learned and probably can be successfully used in real combat. Look at Figures 56 through 61 to see punches and elbow strikes combined. Practice these combinations until they come naturally.

THE HEAD (KOHNE)

Head butting, or *kohne dai*, is one of the most dangerous techniques used in traditional

FIGURE 62: A fighter practices a head butt in the gym.





FIGURES 63 – 65: A head butt is a simple way to avoid being kicked with the knee. To be effective, first block the attacker with your right forearm while grabbing his leg, simultaneously delivering the head butt. Afterward you can throw him.

Burmese boxing. It is, however, a very efficient tool in self-defense.

The blow itself is rather simple—the technique is based on butting a vulnerable part of the opponent's head with a harder part of your head. If poorly executed, however, this blow may be more dangerous for you than for your opponent. This is why it is only used in cases of extreme necessity, when a fighter cannot strike in any other way or when he cannot get out of his opponent's grip. Sometimes a head butt can be aimed at the opponent's solar plexus, but this is quite dangerous since the opponent can respond with an elbow or knee counterstrike. Usually the

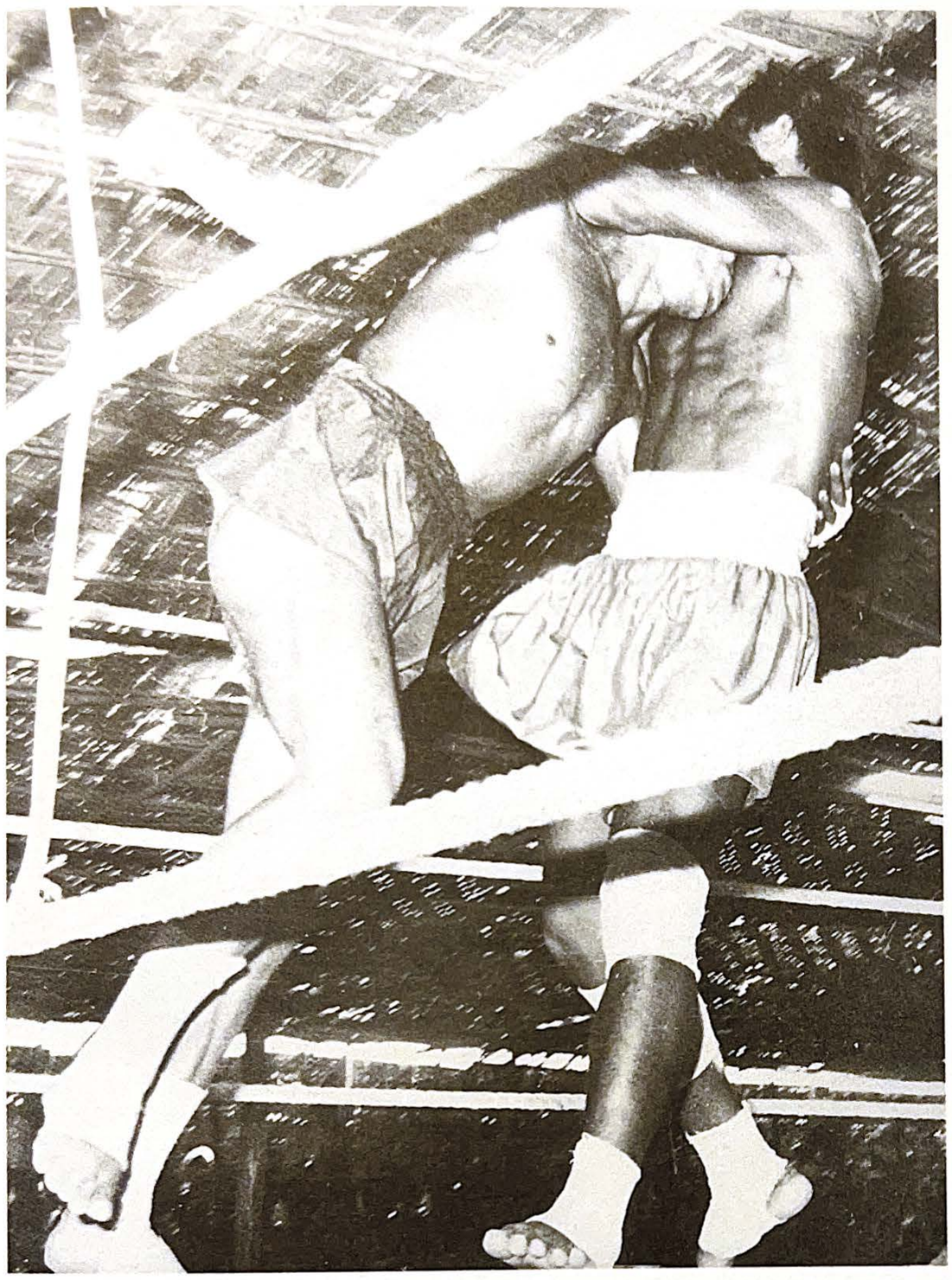


FIGURE 66: A well-timed head butt is delivered in competition.

head butt is delivered with the upper part of the forehead. In rare situations, such as when the opponent is behind the boxer, it is delivered with the nape of the neck. See Figures 63 – 65 to see the head butt used in defense against a knee strike.

Here is one special combination that I remember from training: if you try a high round kick and miss, turn and jump backward and use a head butt on the opponent who is trying to close. The following chapters will have more examples.

Be sure to aim the head butt at vulnerable spots on the opponent's head, such as the temple, nose, chin, cheekbones, and jaw. (While most Europeans consider this kind of fighting "dirty," we must not forget that there are no unfair techniques in self-defense.) In Burma, head-butting is given equal status with all other strikes. Head-butting can sometimes be delivered jumping, as in Figure 62, but such occasions are rare and only experienced boxers have the necessary training for it. Don't forget that while delivering this blow, the mouth must be tightly closed and the jaw clamped in order to avoid injuries.

THE KNEE (DU NE)

The knee strike that the Burmese call *du ne dai* is one of the most efficient tools for close-quarters combat. As a close-range fighting technique, its value can be compared to the elbow. The striking surface is the upper plane of the knee, and the knee must be bent in the shape of a "V." If the knee is not sufficiently bent there is a danger of rather bad injuries when smashing into hard surfaces such as the opponent's elbow, leg, or lower arm.

Like the Thai, the Burmese are true masters of in-fighting. A fighter can deliver a blow to any part of his foe's body with his knee. Of course it is easiest to hit him in the solar plexus or the ribs, but strikes to the head are also possible by pulling the opponent down to the side (Figure 69) or with a jumping kick (Figure 76). The hips should always be turned in the direction of the blow.

In the first stages of training we recommend shadow boxing before working with a partner. Try exercising in this manner: from a basic stance hold your arms in front of your head, imagining that you are grabbing the opponent around his neck and then dragging him down and to the side at the same time as delivering the knee.

The basic hold is called *chouda* (Figures 70 and 71). Some boxers try to hold an opponent strongly with their forearms in an attempt to stop his blood flow. (Ancient methods included exercising with a tree instead of partner in efforts to harden the inner forearms. In such

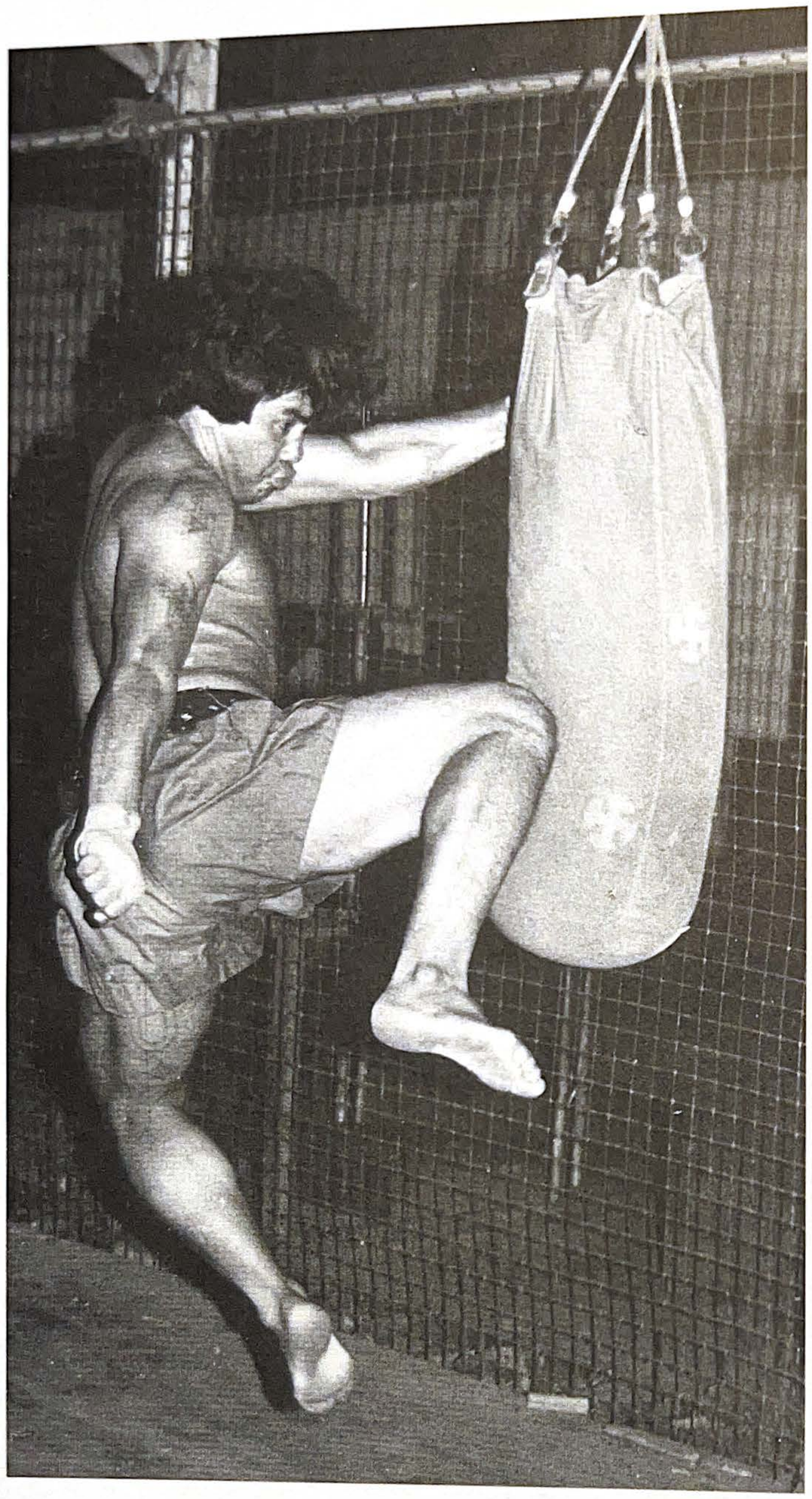


FIGURE 67: A fighter practices a jumping knee kick on the bag.

painful exercises you grab a tree and perform rotation with the wrists in order to harden the inner forearms. After some time your chouda should be stronger and stronger, but this is a very painful and ancient method.)

When delivering a knee strike, your movement should be powerful and sudden (Figure 72). Your chin should be kept close to your chest in order to avoid a possible uppercut. In this move, speed and tenacity are more important than muscular power.

The basic knee kicks shown in Figures 68 and 69 must be learned before all others. The jumping knee kick (*koun byi du ne da'i*) (Figure 73) is a popular technique often seen at boxing matches. Whether the kick is straight or circular it is delivered in the same way.

After a fighter has mastered the basic kicks, he can move on to more advanced moves. A double flying knee kick is shown against the bag in Figure 75 and a nice flying knee kick is shown in Figure 76. The double flying knee kick, applicable only in rare situations, requires exceptional mastery of the basic techniques and fighting experience of many years. We recommend that beginners and younger boxers do not attempt this in a real fight. The same is true of the over-arm knee kick shown in Figure 74. A high level of flexibility is necessary for this type of strike, and not everyone is best suited to perform it. It should be reserved as a "surprise" technique. In real fighting, it is too risky.

While it may seem that the knee kick is simple to deliver, it takes a lot of practice before it can be truly useful in a real fight. I must stress that the impact of this blow comes from a powerful push off the ground, not merely from lifting the leg—the most common beginner's error. A weak knee kick is easy to counter. As is the case with all other techniques, coordination of the whole body is necessary, especially in the rotation of the hips, which increases the force of the strike. The opponent must be pulled down and to the side at the same time as you strike him. It is very important to unbalance him because a fighter with no balance cannot defend himself.

If you quickly become exhausted while practicing bag work or knee sparring it may mean that you are too stiff; you must be relaxed before you can become confident in close fighting. When you reach this level, you will have a big advantage over your opponent. Don't imagine that you can knock down your

FIGURE 68: A long-range knee kick is a good defensive technique that keeps the opponent at a distance.

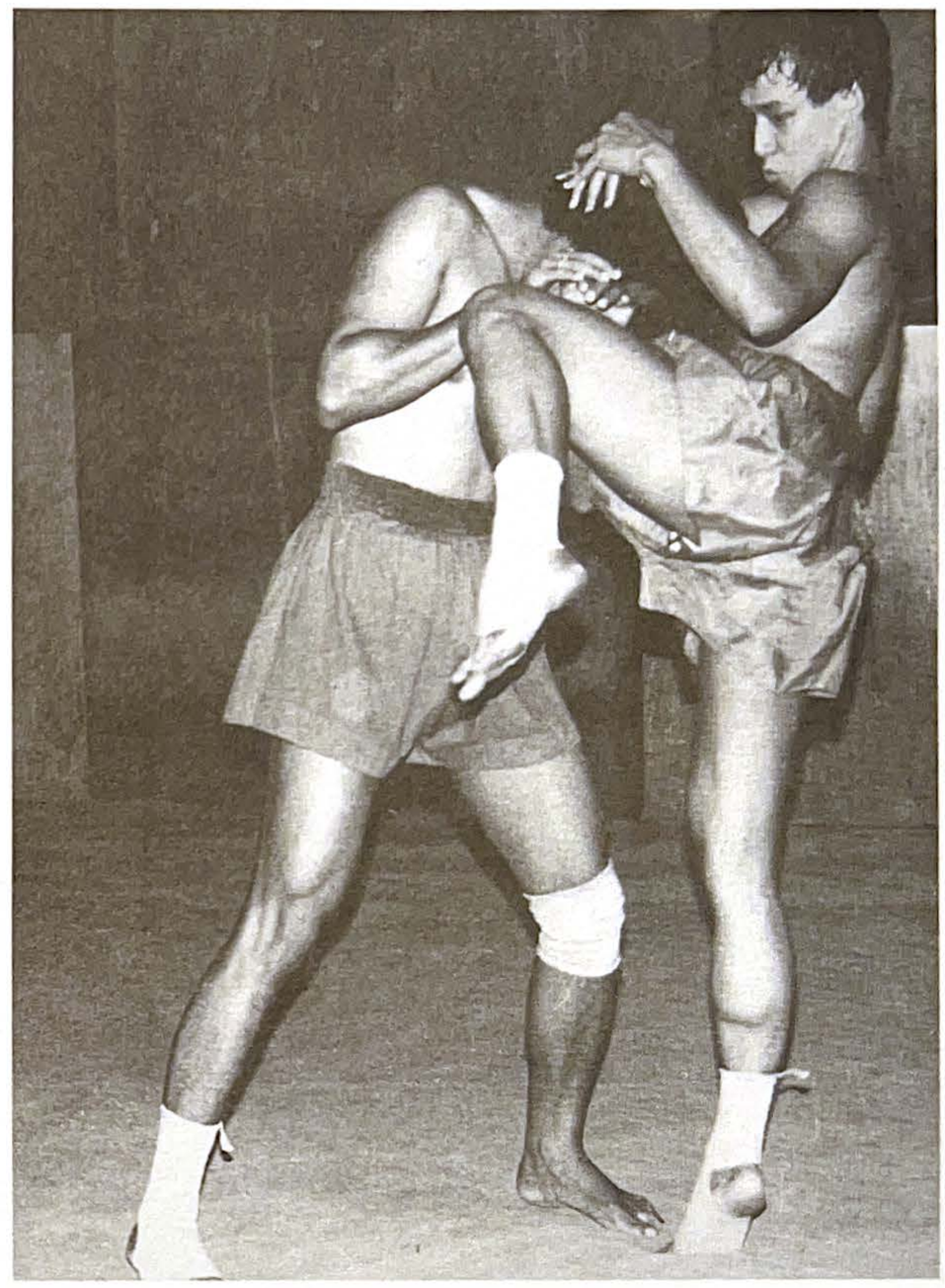
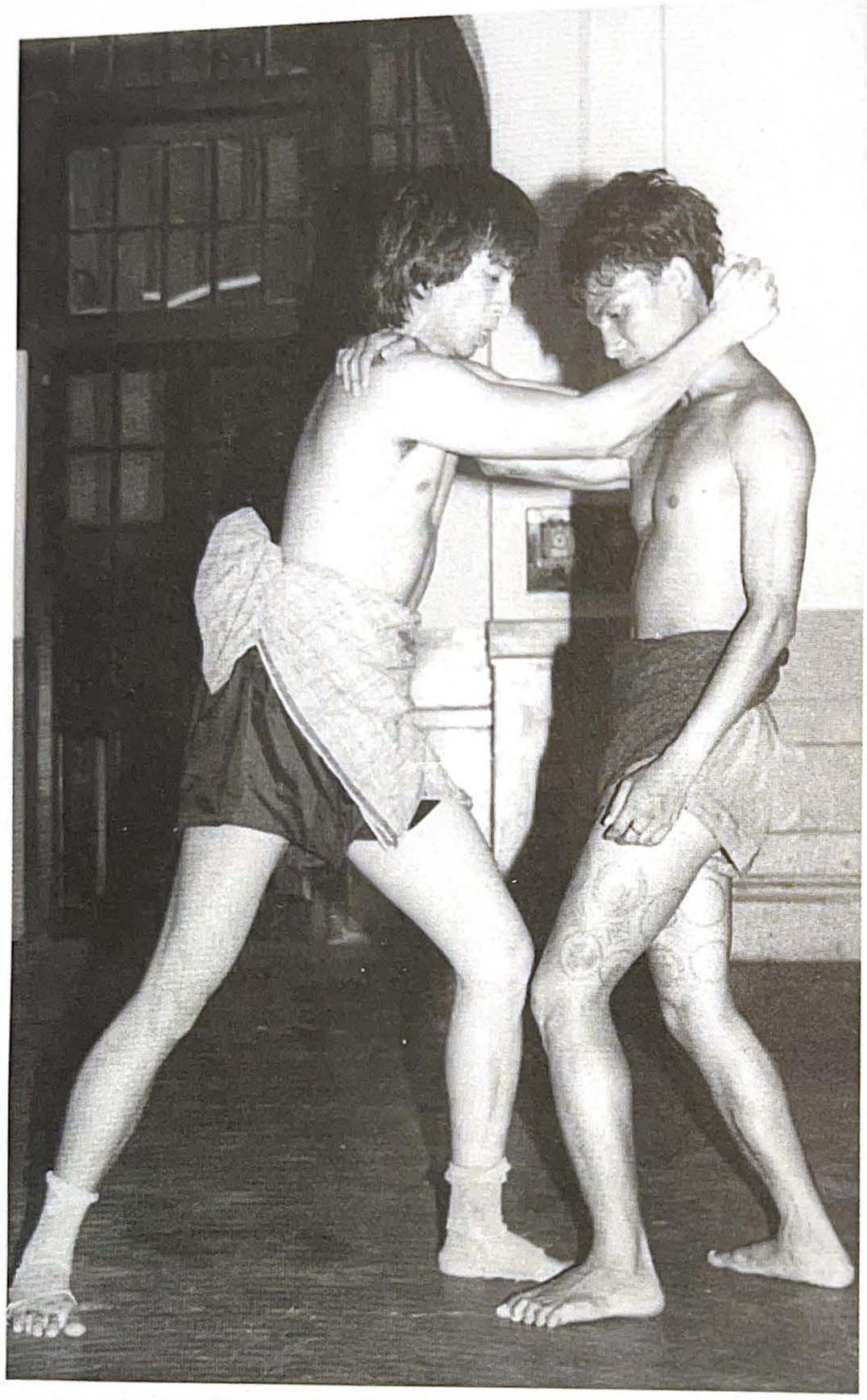


FIGURE 69: A knee kick to the head. To be successful, you must unbalance your opponent with a sudden jerk.

FIGURE 70: Chouda is the basic hold for close-range fighting.



FIGURES 71 AND 72: You can practice the basic knee kick with a partner, but do not deliver full-power blows. To eliminate fear and stiffness at close range it is essential to practice, which requires trust and cooperation between partners.

opponent with just one knee kick; most well-prepared fighters can receive several hard knee kicks. A good tactic is to soften them with a series of punch-and-knee combinations.

Figure 68 shows a special kind of knee kick that is delivered without holding the opponent; the main target is the opponent's solar plexus. Lean back to stay out of the reach of his punching attempts.

In jumping knee techniques it is important to push off with one leg and then deliver the kick with the other at the highest point of the jump (Figure 67). (There is another kind of jumping knee in which you execute the kick with the same leg you jumped off, but it is a little bit slower technique and a more complicated one.) As with all knee kicks, the instep of the kicking foot must be extended. It is best to execute this technique with one or two steps to pick up momentum and increase the impact of the strike.

THE LEG (NENDA)

Front Kick (Nenda Chipova)

Nenda chipova can be roughly translated as a front heel kick. This extremely simple kick can be used for either offense or defense and can hit all parts of the opponent's body from the knee to the head. It is easily combined with

FIGURE 73: The jumping knee kick.

FIGURE 74: Over-arm knee kick. Be certain to neutralize the opponent's arms.

hand techniques and all other types of kicks.

While similar fighting sports use the ball of the foot as the basic hitting surface, Burmese traditional boxing uses the heel, then the ball. Both kicking styles are certainly good, but the heel has the advantage of hardness and you don't have to worry about damaging your toes. On the other hand, the ball of the foot allows slight extension of the kicking range.

Whatever the case, in Figures 80 through 82 you can see how the Burmese deliver this kick to the midsection, which can be very powerful and may toss the opponent back several yards. In the initial phase the leg is raised as high as possible, with the knee in front of the chest (Figures 80 and 81) and then the kick is delivered with a forward thrust with the heel (Figure 82). When delivering such a kick, it is important to make sure you are protected from your opponent's counterattack.

Position the sole of the foot so that the heel protrudes in the direction of the kick. This kick based more on the strength of the thrust than explosive strength, so we can classify it as a "pushing kick." Following the kick, the foot must be immediately returned to the ground to avoid being grabbed.

After mastering the technical performance of this kick, it is a good idea to practice it

FIGURE 75: The double knee kick is an advanced technique.

FIGURE 76: The flying knee kick targets the opponent's chest and head.

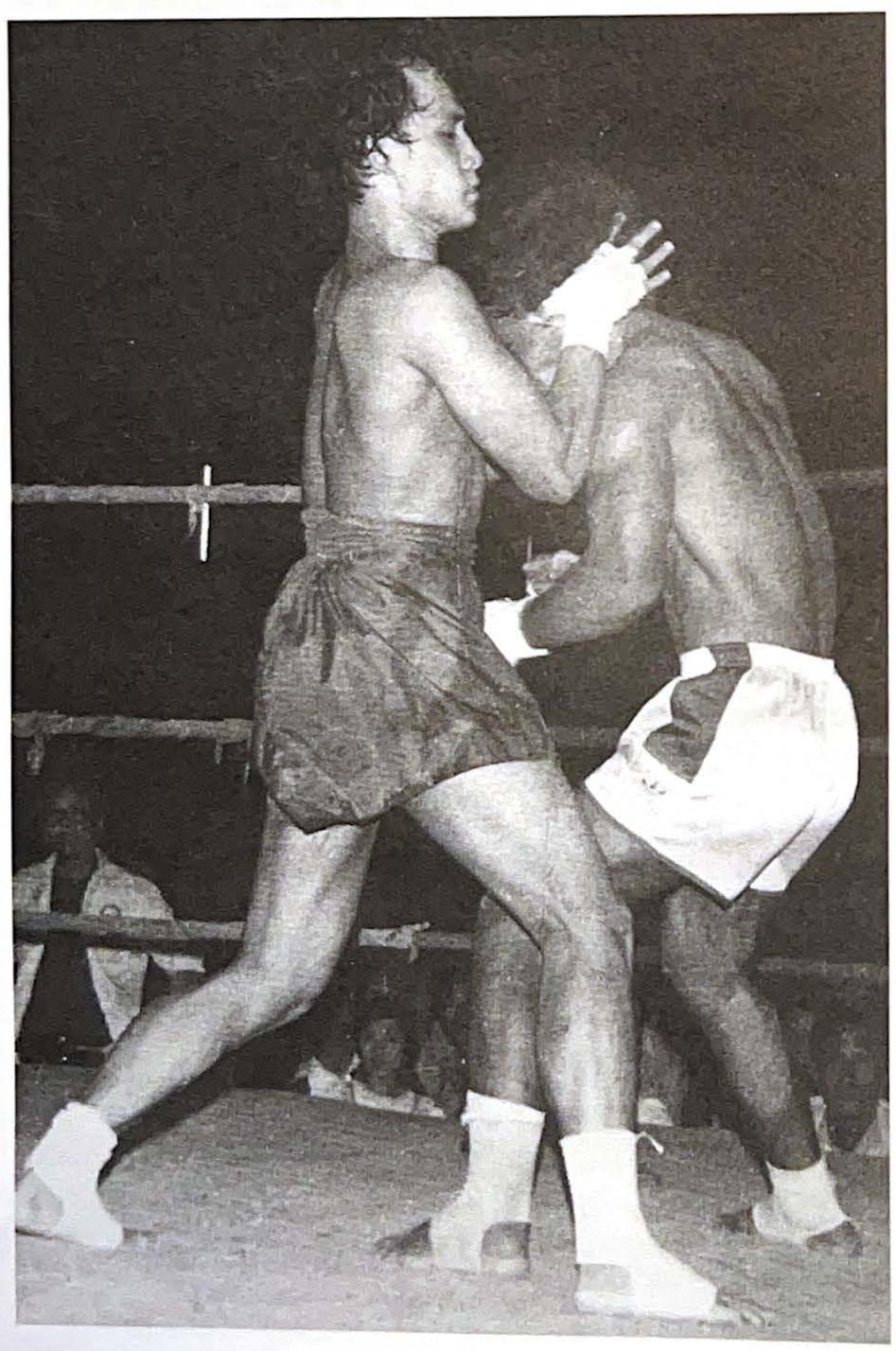


FIGURE 77: Nilar Win grabs his opponent just before delivering a knee kick.

FIGURE 78: If you don't pull your knee back quickly enough, you can easily be thrown.

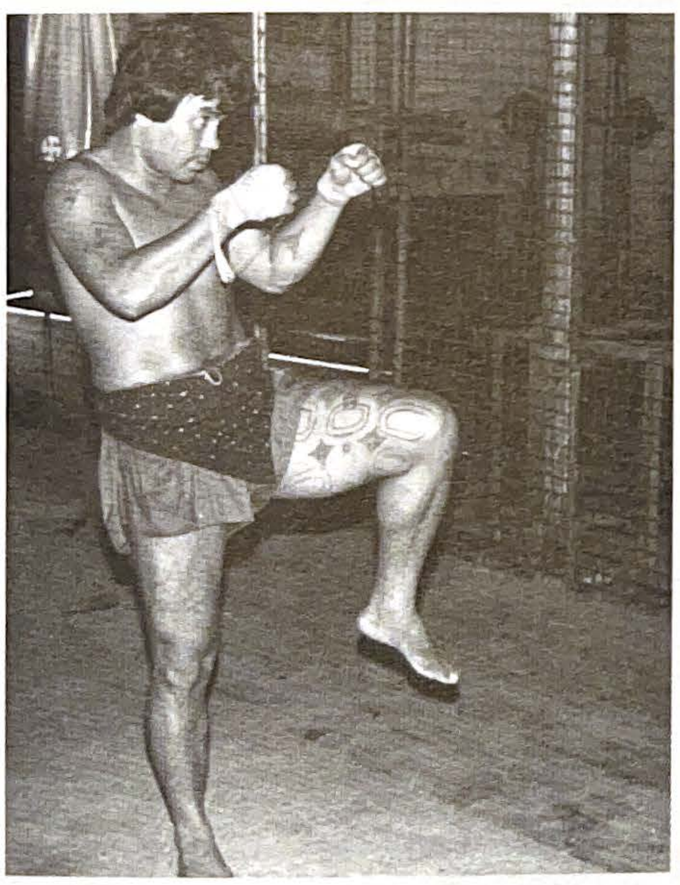
FIGURE 79: High front kick. This stance and posture is similar to a karate move.

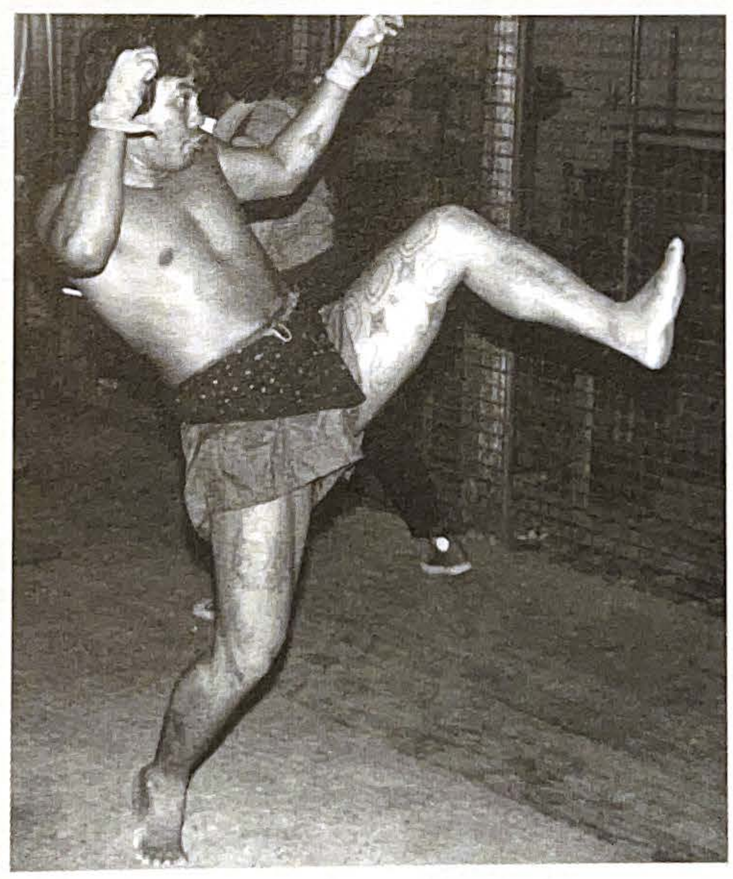
against the bag (Figure 83) to get a firm sense of strength, speed, and timing. Later you can put a knee or round kick into the combination. The front kick can be described as a kind of leg jab, because it is possible to start numerous combinations with it. (See the section on modern training methods in Chapter 3.)

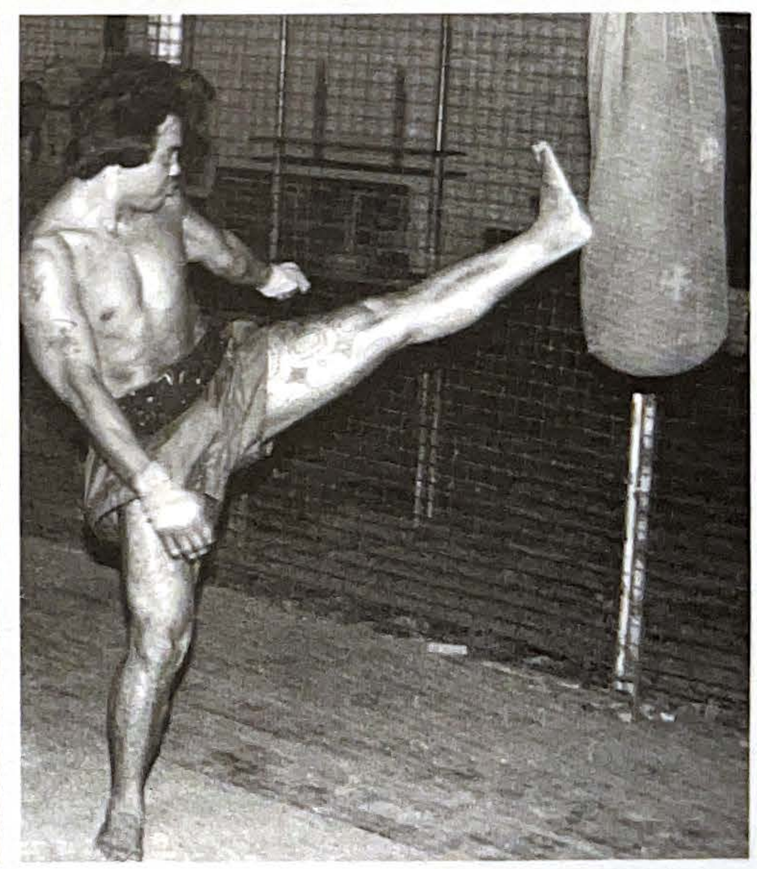
Another type of front kick is the jump kick (Figure 84), performed by jumping with one foot in the air and delivering the kick with the other. The kicking leg must be parallel to the ground at the moment of impact to maintain balance when landing. If you wish to hit high, you must jump high, which is easier if you create space for a few steps of momentum. The kicks should be aimed at the opponent's body (Figure 86).

Occasionally there may be a chance for a kick to the jaw, especially if you can use the jump kick. This kick is very often seen as a defensive technique to keep your opponent at bay (Figure 88).

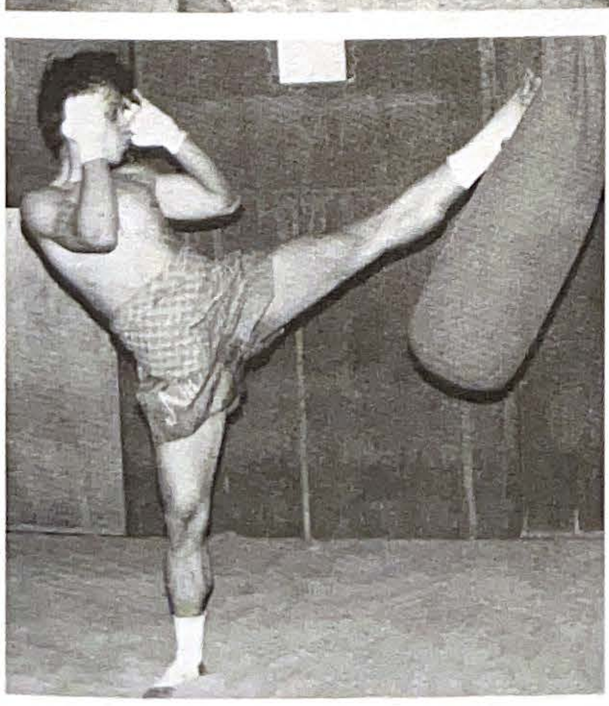
In situations where the opponent is leaning down or is bent toward the ground, one can use an upward kick with the shin or instep of the foot (Figure 87). This technique is quite natural and does not require special training (you often will see this technique on the street), but mastering the basic front kick takes a lot of effort.







FIGURES 80 – 82 (above): The front thrust with the heel is an original Burmese technique.



FIGURES 83 AND 84 (left): The front kick and flying front kick against the bag should be part of a regular training session.

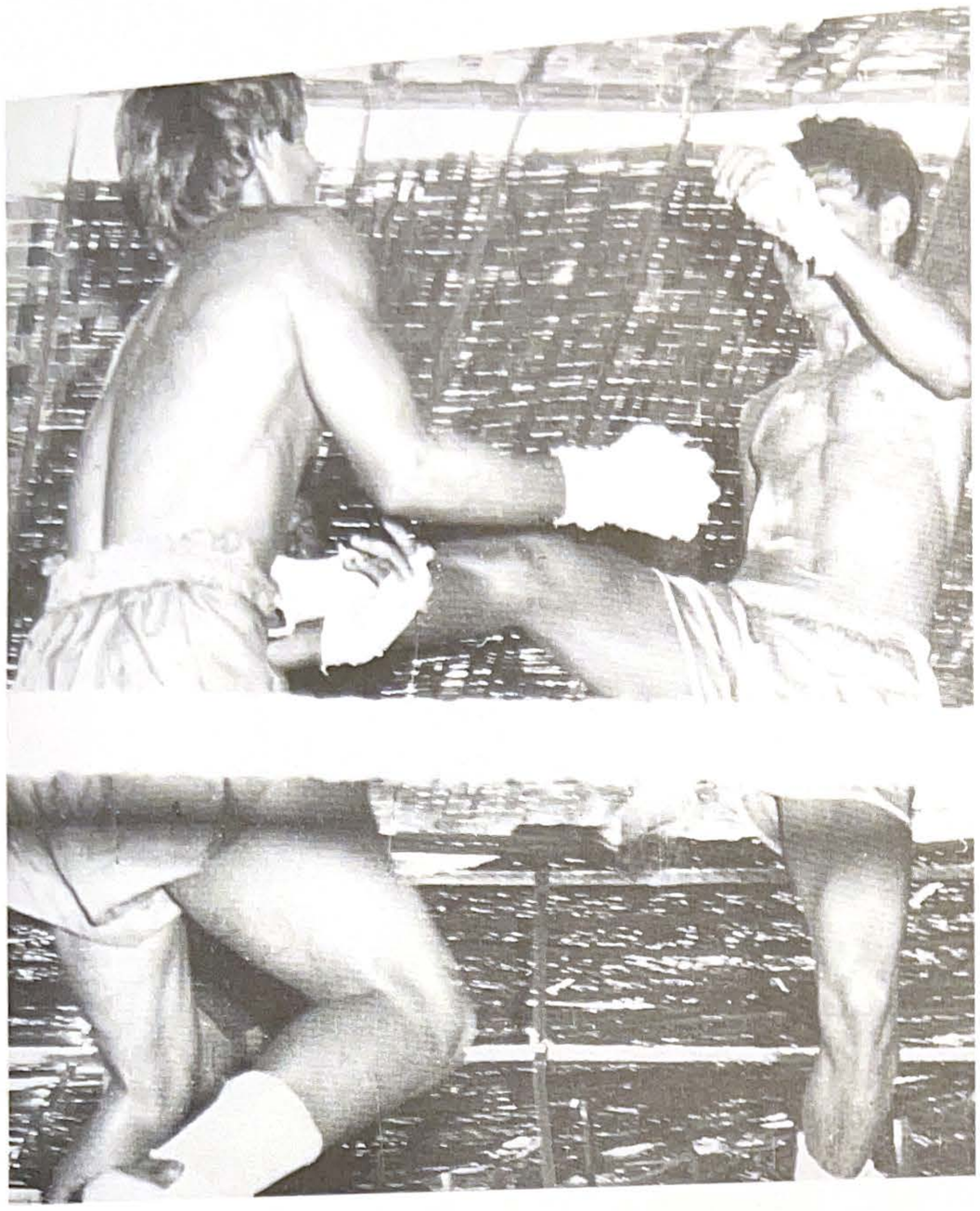


FIGURE 85: When practicing in the ring, try to catch your opponent off guard. Keep your arms close to your body to protect your head.

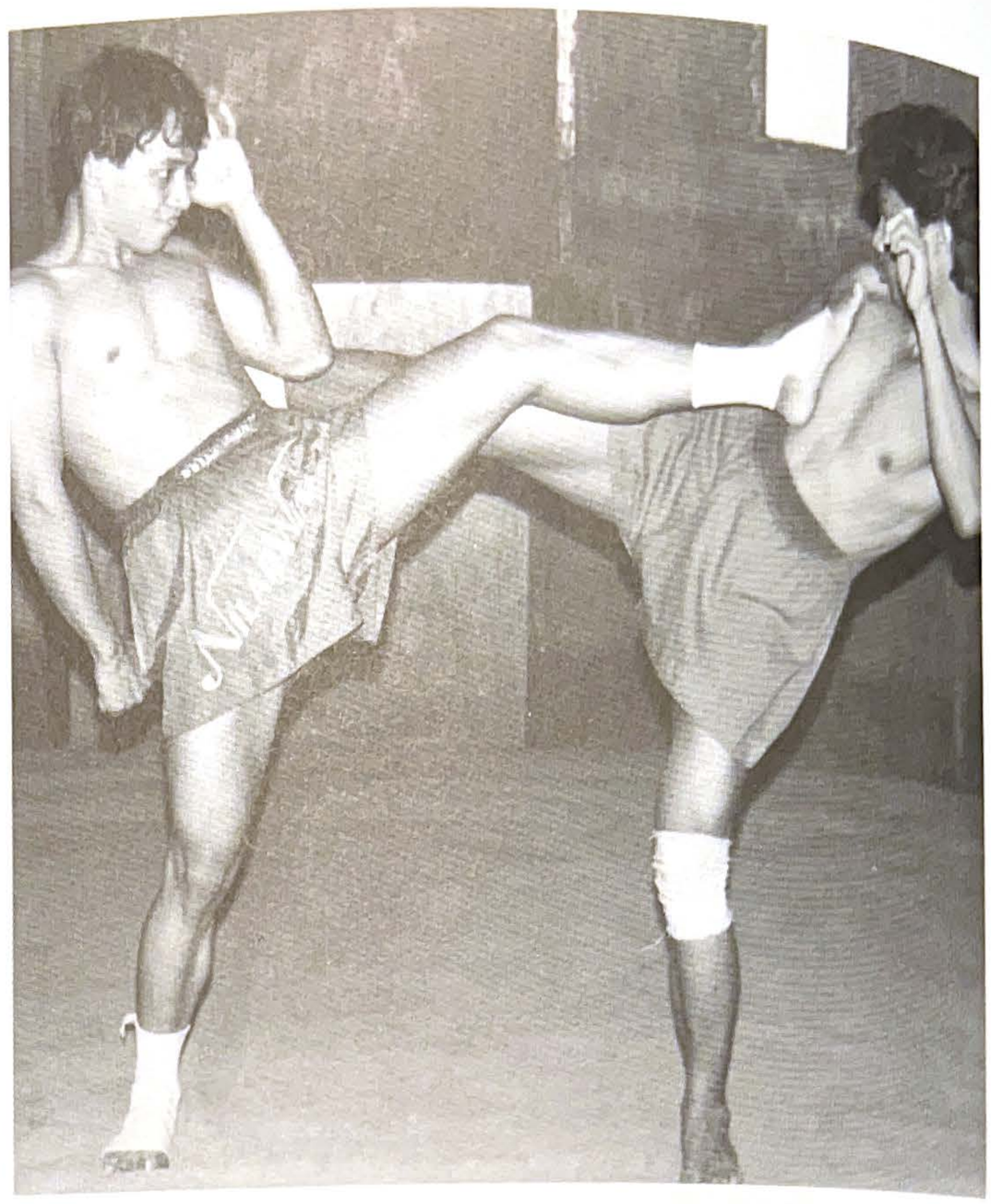


FIGURE 86: If you can react in time to a round kick attack, you can use the front kick as a counter. If your opponent is unbalanced, you should follow up with your own combination.

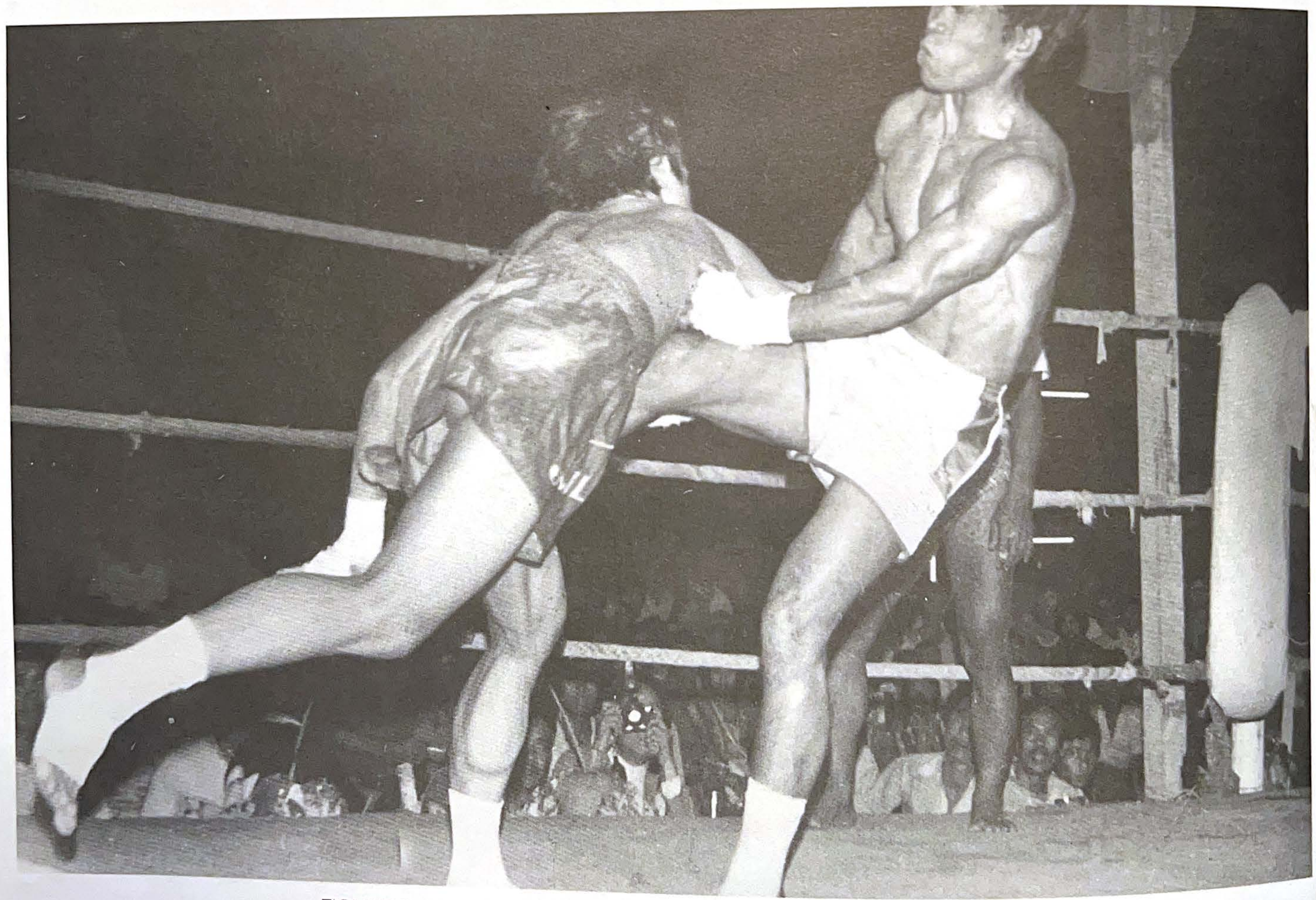


FIGURE 87: It's an old question: What's more efficient, the leg or the arm?

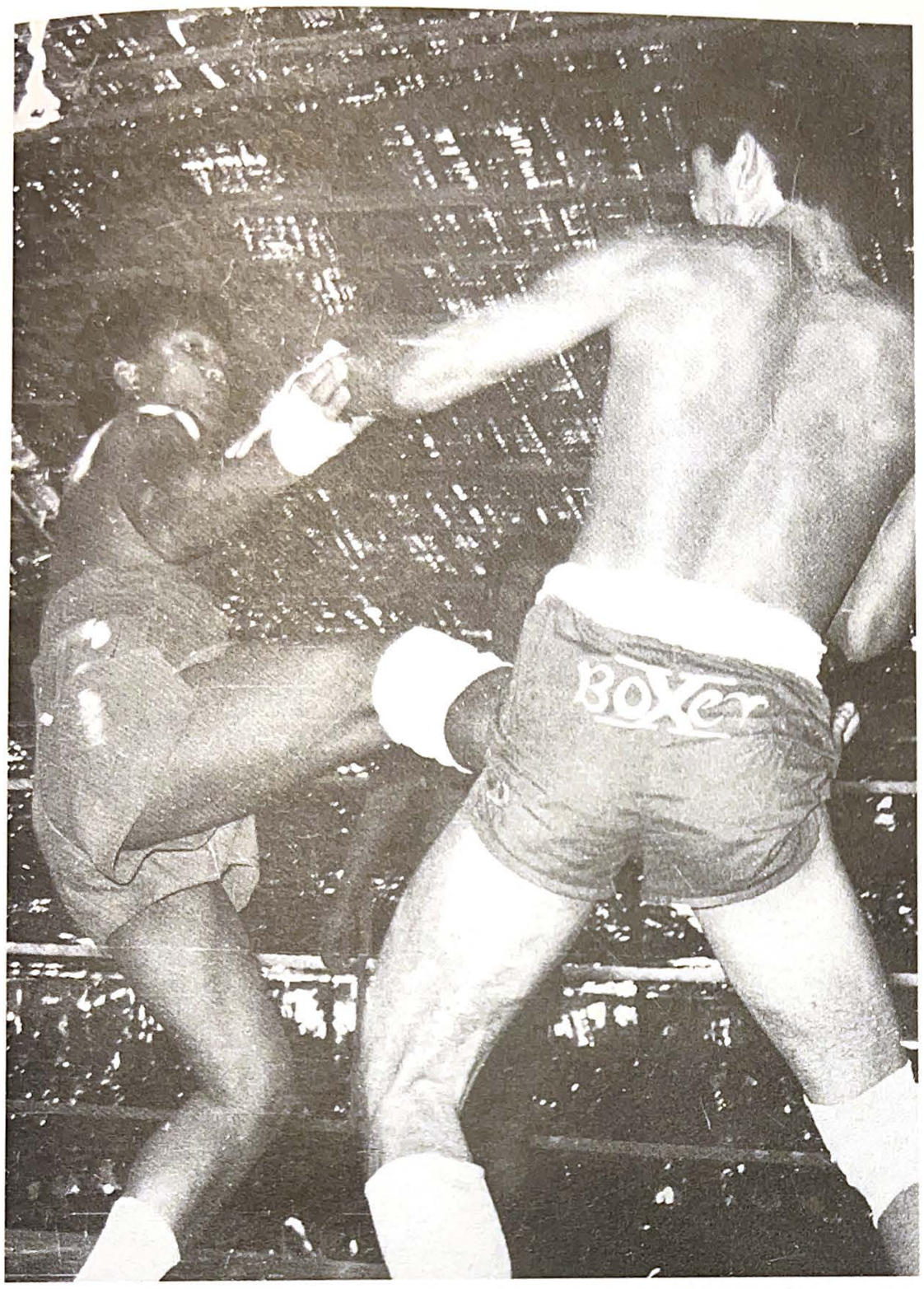


FIGURE 88: It is well within the rules to execute a front kick to the opponent's upper knee or thigh.

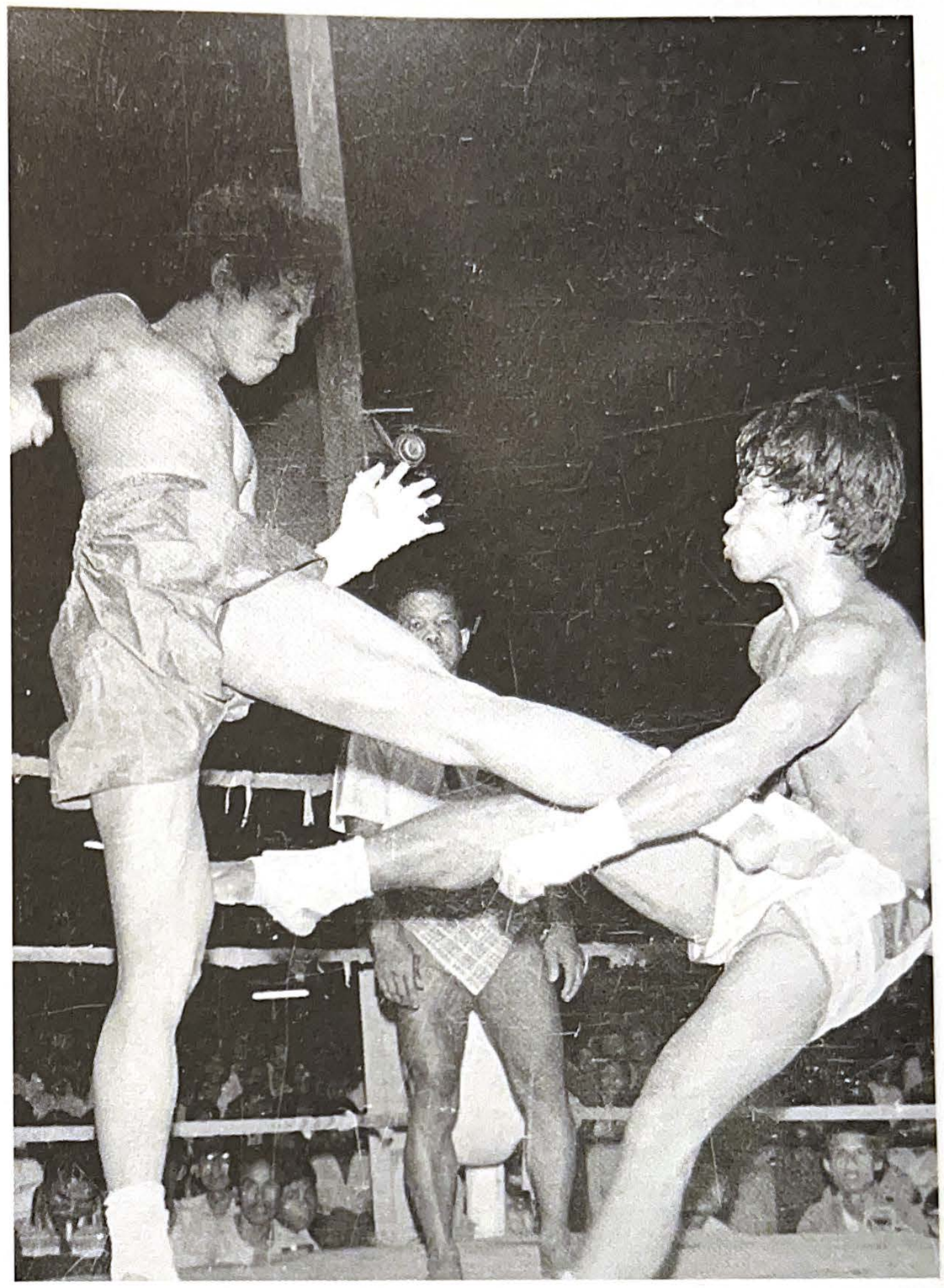


FIGURE 89: A round kick applied in the ring.

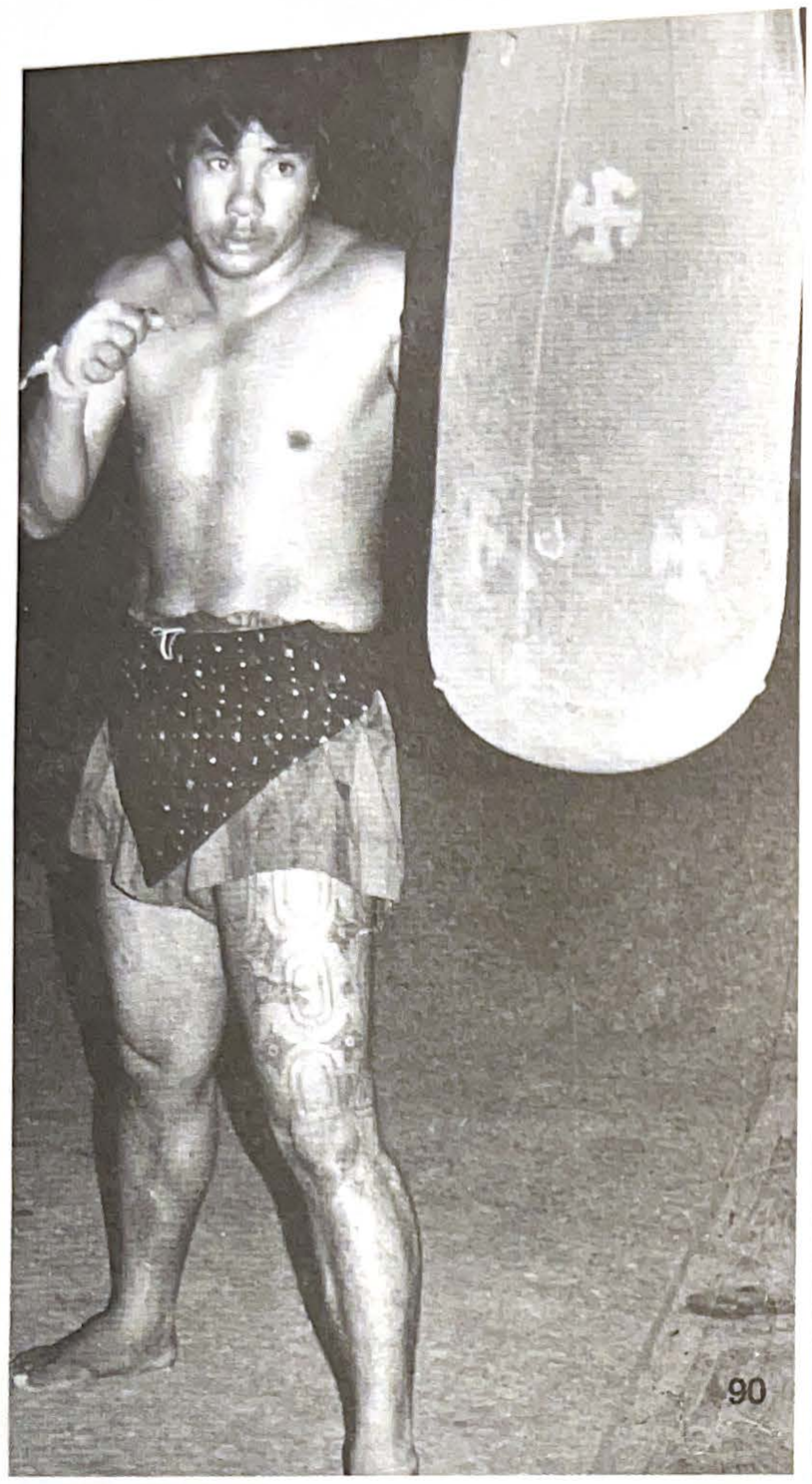
Front kicks to the knee are an ideal technique to stop your opponent without exposing yourself. In this case it makes no difference whether you use the heel or ball of the foot as a kicking tool. Remember the old Thai proverb: "The opponent who cannot stand, cannot fight."

Round Kick (Nenda Chivya)

Both the round kick and the front kick are basic techniques taught from the beginning of training. The round kick, however, is the most popular kick in traditional Burmese boxing and can be used in almost every situation. With this kick we can attack all parts of the opponent's body and counter against every kind of attack, which is not the case with other kicking techniques.

The round kick combines well with most of the hand and leg techniques, both for defense and offense. The hitting surfaces are the instep and shin, which can be transformed into fearsome weapons through special exercises.

When delivered correctly, this kick can be unusually powerful and almost any opponent can be knocked down with it. However, in order to attain that level of skill and power the fighter must practice for a long time, starting first with slowly executed kicks in the manner of shadowboxing, then using the bag and kicking pads. At first, the attention should be focused on the proper "start." This was mentioned earlier but is such a crucial principle in performing this technique that it bears repeating. The foot must move toward the target in a circular path, with rotation of the



FIGURES 90 – 92: From the basic stance push off suddenly with the right leg and turn your body and hips in the direction of the kick. At full extension, tense your muscles for a fraction of a second, then lower your right foot to its original position. Circle around the bag and repeat techniques with both legs. Rotate on the toes of the supporting foot.

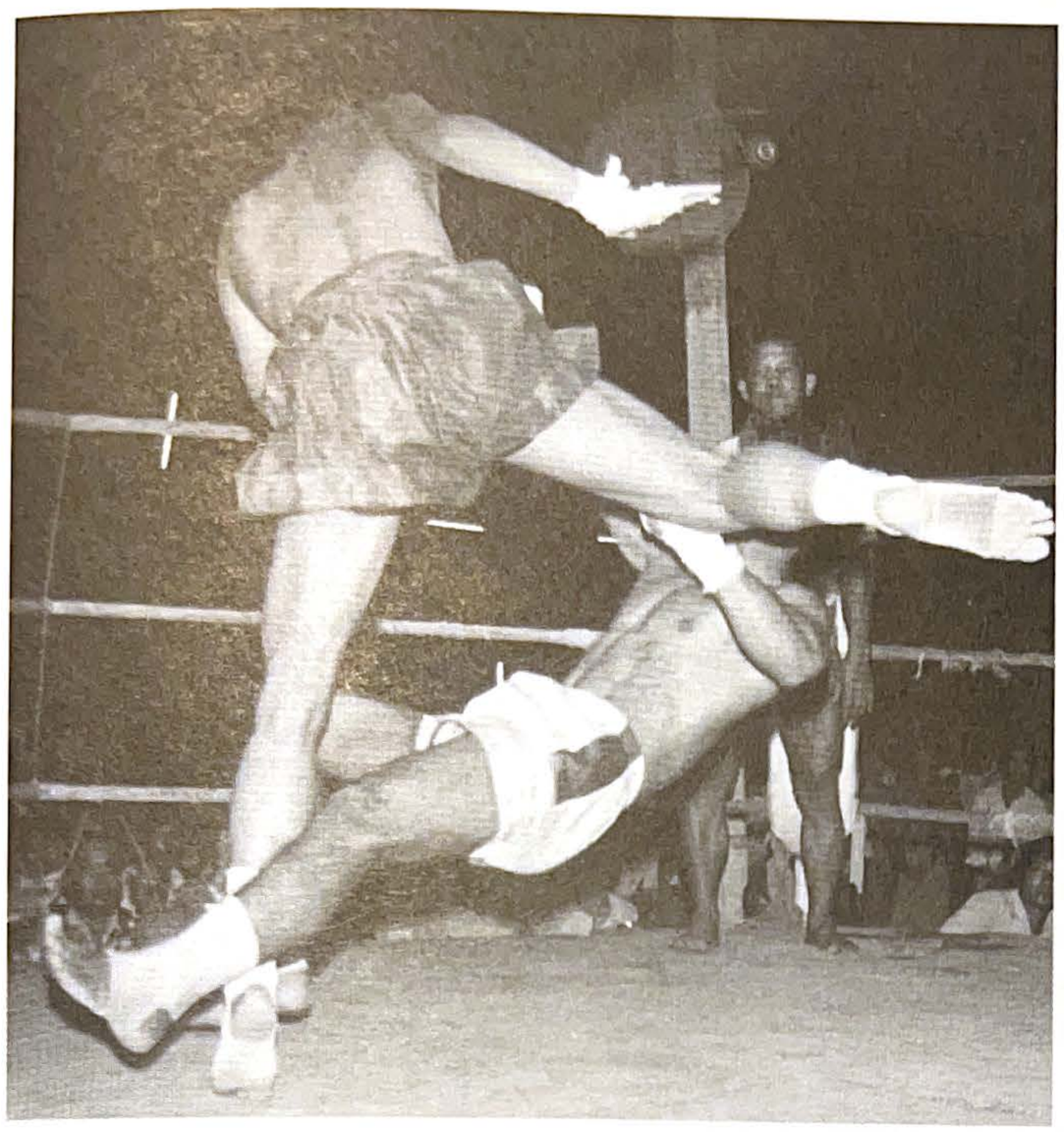


FIGURE 93: The round kick can be a devastating tool.

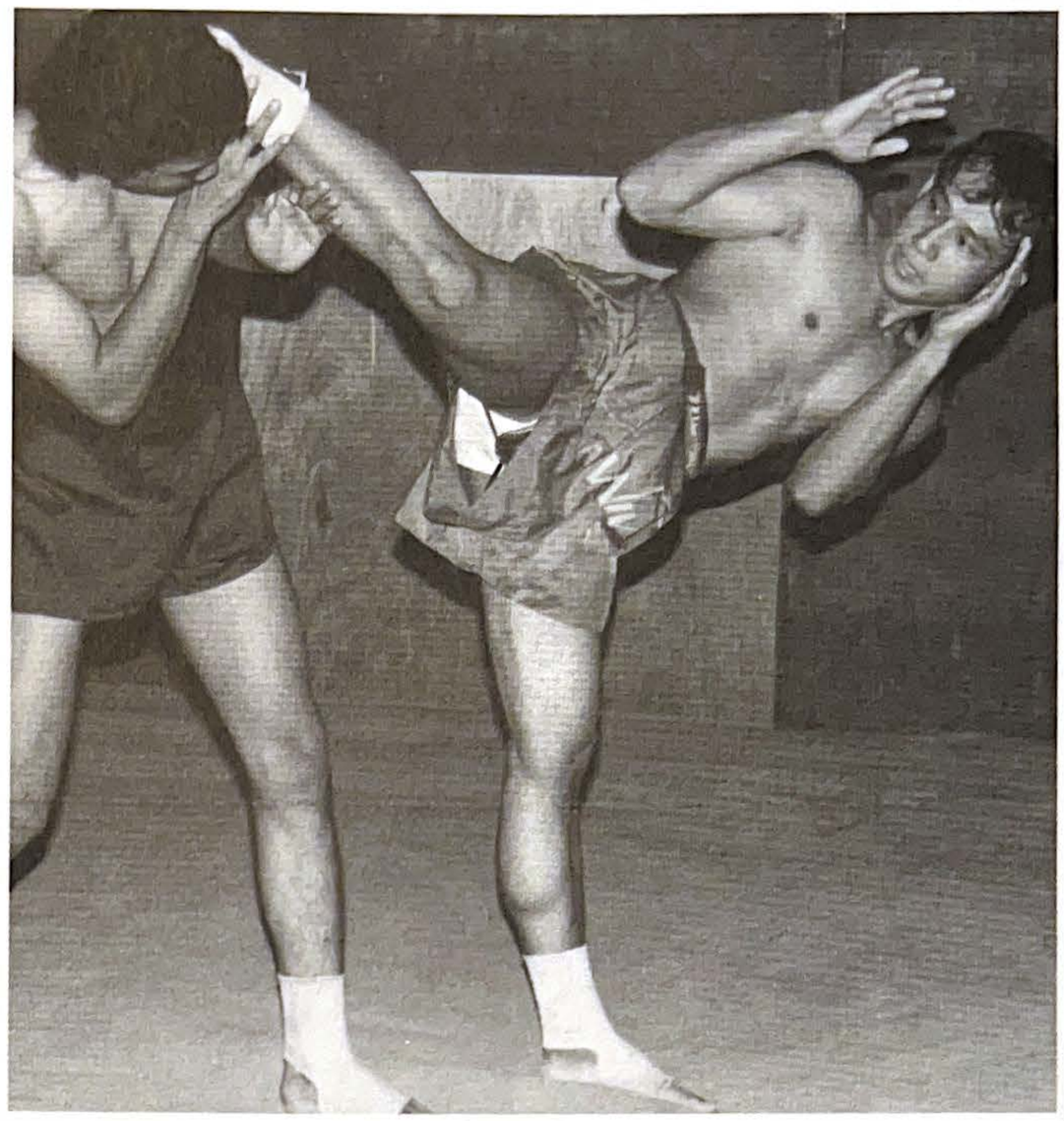


FIGURE 94: The crocodile tail kick is a wonderful kicking technique that imitates the crocodile, as its name implies. The first stage of the kick is almost identical to the round kick, except the path is higher. At almost full extension, when your opponent is convinced that you are going to miss him, change direction and kick from above. Hitting targets are the head, neck, and upper shoulder.

hips and body. Short contractions in fractions of seconds are made only when you make contact with the target. Many beginners, and others as well, consciously shorten the path of the kick in order to deliver it more quickly, but they forget that they are reducing its power in the process. The kick must have a purely circular spin; only then is it possible to reap the greatest effect.

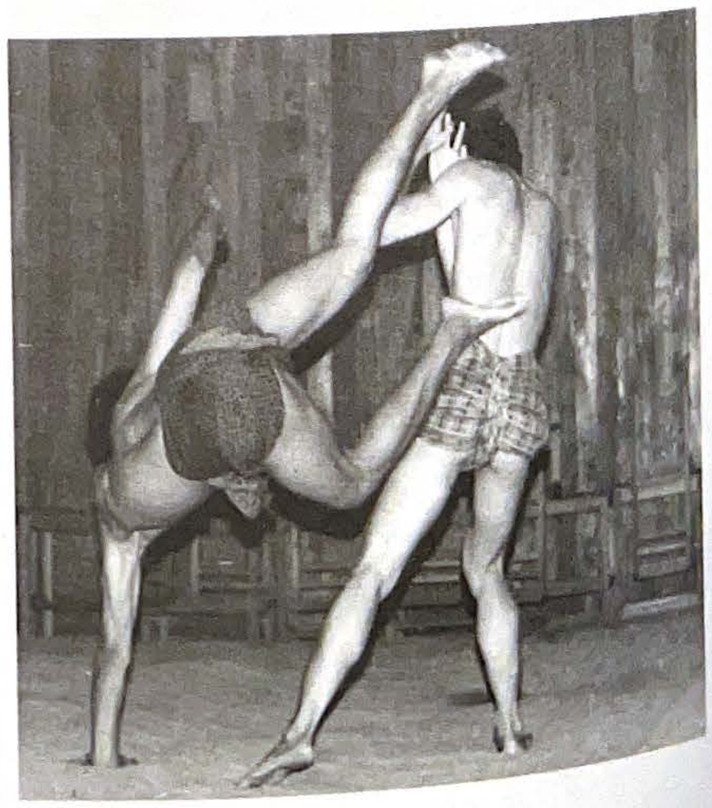
The next mistake that often comes up is for the beginning fighter to rotate his hips in one direction and his shoulders in the other, which results in a loss of power. (This is a very common mistake with former karate and taekwon do students.)

The foot used in the kick should go back the same way to the ground in order to deliver several kicks in a row. Balance on the ball of the supporting foot rather than the whole sole to maintain speed and power.

The leg should always kick the target at a right angle. The path of the round kick on the bag is shown in Figures 90 through 92, and its application in the ring is shown in Figures 89, 93, and 109 (low kick). The position of the hand and foot when practicing can be seen in Figure 95. (Pay close attention to Figure 94, where you can see a special sort of round kick, known to the Burmese and Thai as the "crocodile tail kick." The name describes this technique perfectly. The main difference from the round kick is in the final phase, when you change direction and kick from above.)

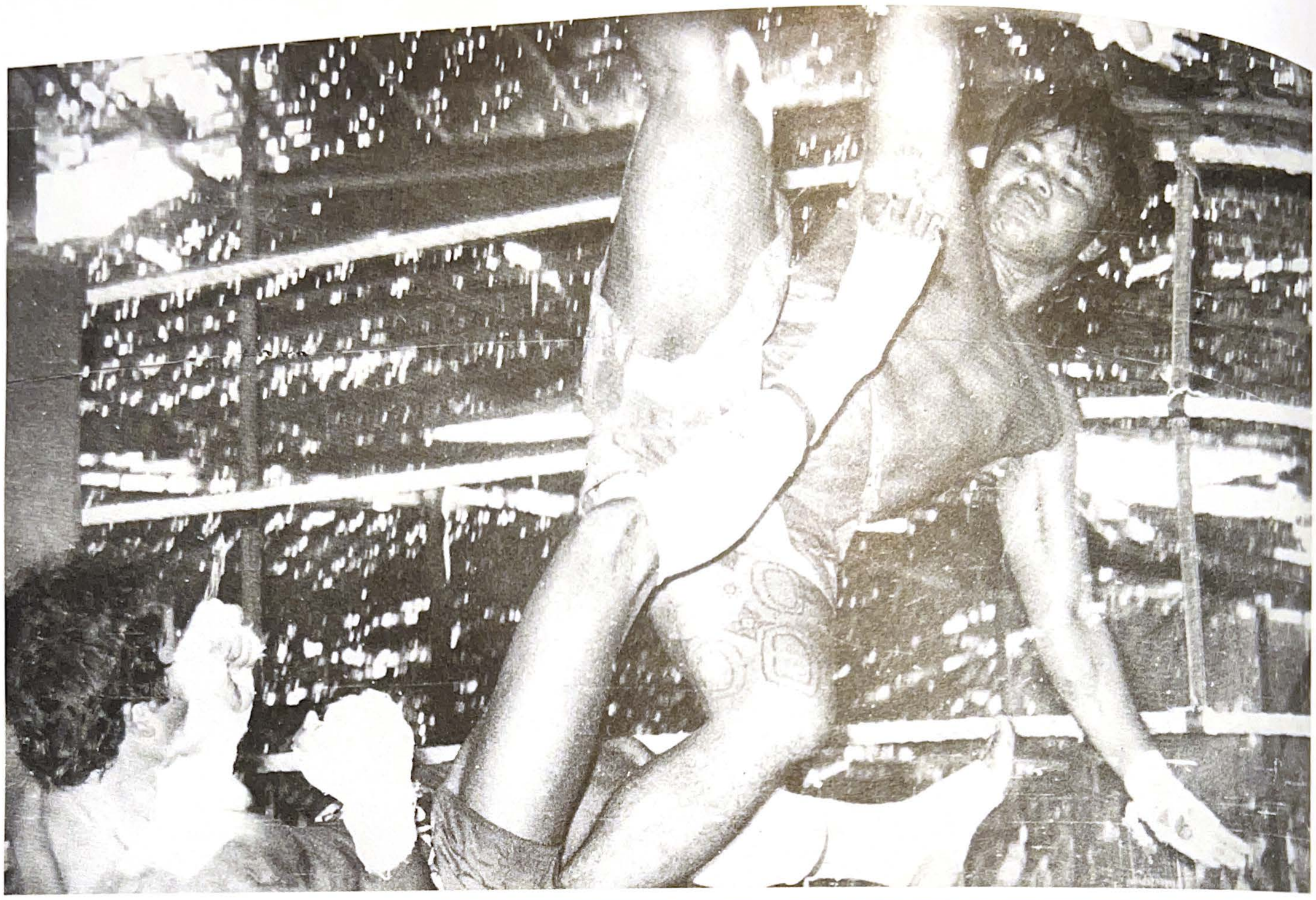
After mastering these techniques, the fighter can begin training in the various jumping round kicks (Figures 98 and 99), which can also be seen quite frequently in matches (Figures 101 and 102). But the jumping round kick is primarily an attacking technique and a surprise blow; while the built-up momentum

FIGURE 95: The classic round kick. Pay attention to the position of the hands, distance, and body and hip rotation.

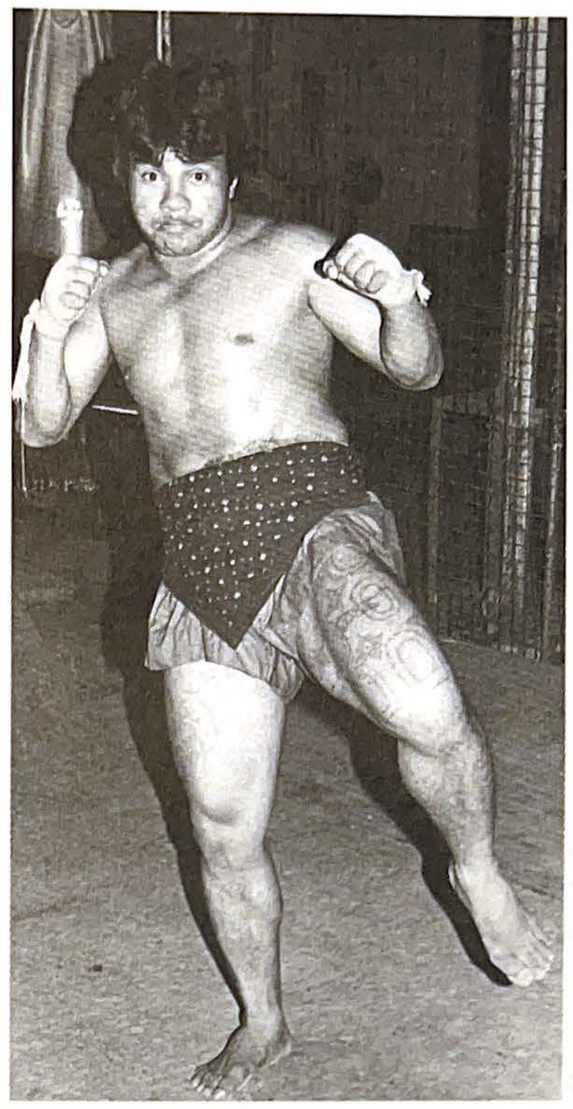


FIGURES 96, 97, AND 100: Double round drop kick. If you have space for momentum, you may be able to execute a double round kick, but this technique is more attractive than effective.

FIGURES 98 AND 99: Flying roundhouse kicks are popular in the ring, but require a lot of practice with a partner or against the bag.



FIGURES 101 AND 102: Every match has scenes similar to these: lots of exchanges of round kicks and flying kicks. As Nilar Win and Niang Waing demonstrate the technique, you can see that they can put them to use very effectively in the ring.



FIGURES 103 – 106: These photos show a common combination of knee kicks and high round kicks. Keep your body in motion when performing moves like this.

gives the kick a lot of power, the opponent gets more time to dodge, too.

The Burmese call the jumping round kick (Figure 99) the *khoun gana*, and only the greatest boxers can use it successfully in the ring. A fighter who aspires to such skill must work at it, and this is how it is done: with a step or two to pick up momentum the fighter usually thrusts one leg as high as possible in the air and delivers the kick with the other. A steady jump is vital. You can also practice kicking with the same foot that you jumped on, but this is more difficult.

Pay attention to one more special technique, which is similar to a wrestling move, shown in Figures 96, 97, and 100; some boxers use it and fall on the ground and the referee must stop the fight. You can deliver such double drop kick while supporting yourself with one arm (Figure 100).

Some of the popular combinations taught at all Burmese boxing camps are shown in Figures 103 – 108. Mastering these moves will take time and practice.

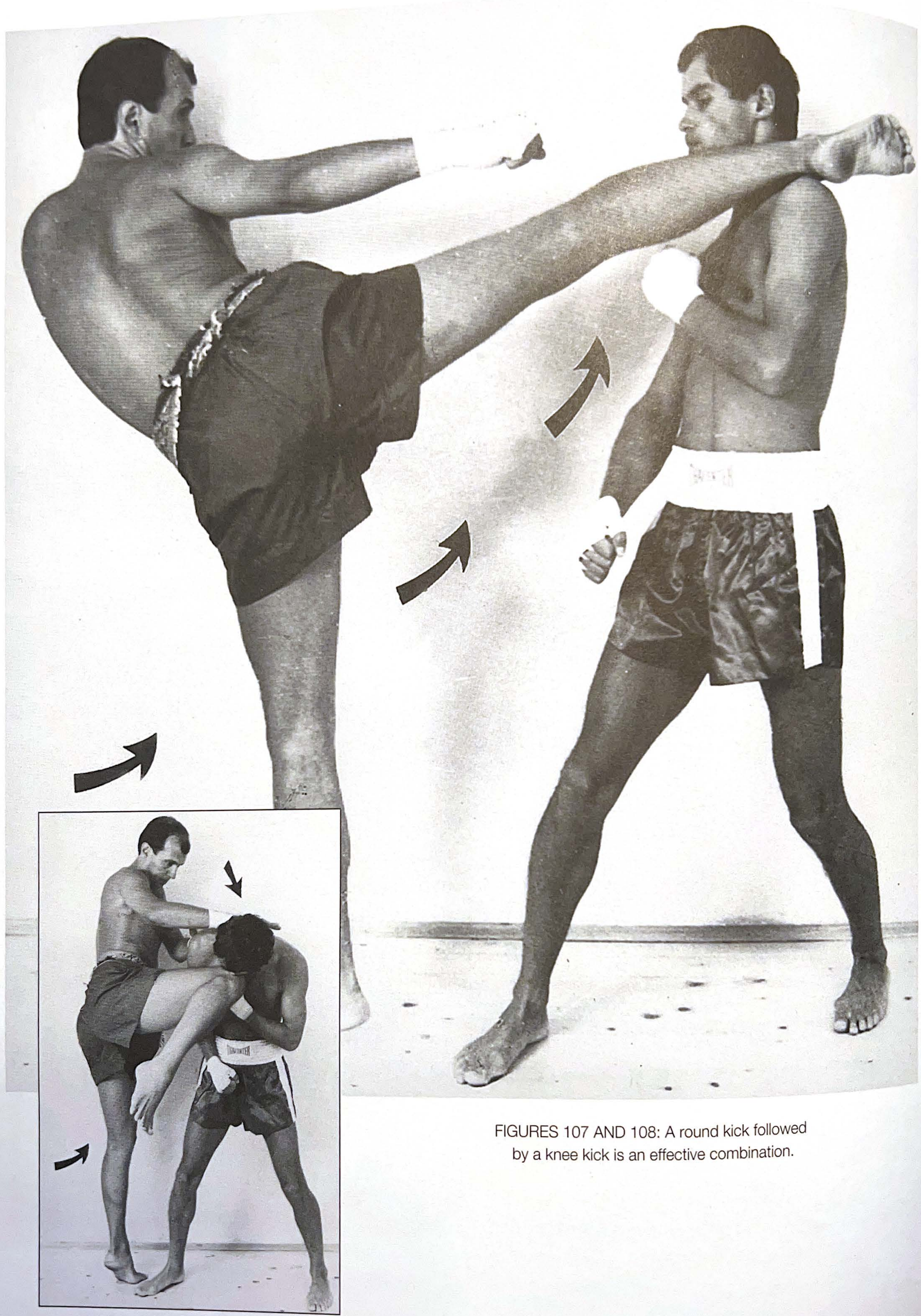
Side Kick (Naubya Ka)

Though the side kick is quite popular in some Asian martial arts, it usually is only used for defense in traditional Burmese boxing. With all respect to karate and taekwon do practitioners, this is considered a secondary kicking techniques and is rarely seen at matches.

The hitting surfaces in this kick are the heel or edge of the foot. The kick has a slightly longer range than the front kick because the body stretches fully in the direction of the strike. The supporting leg turns in about half a circle so that the toes are pointing in the opposite direction of the blow.

The delivery of this kick is not simple and requires great coordination of all parts of the body. It is important that in the first phase of the blow the supporting leg is slightly bent at the knee in order to achieve maximum impact by the sudden push off from the ground.

At the moment the kick is delivered, the



FIGURES 107 AND 108: A round kick followed by a knee kick is an effective combination.

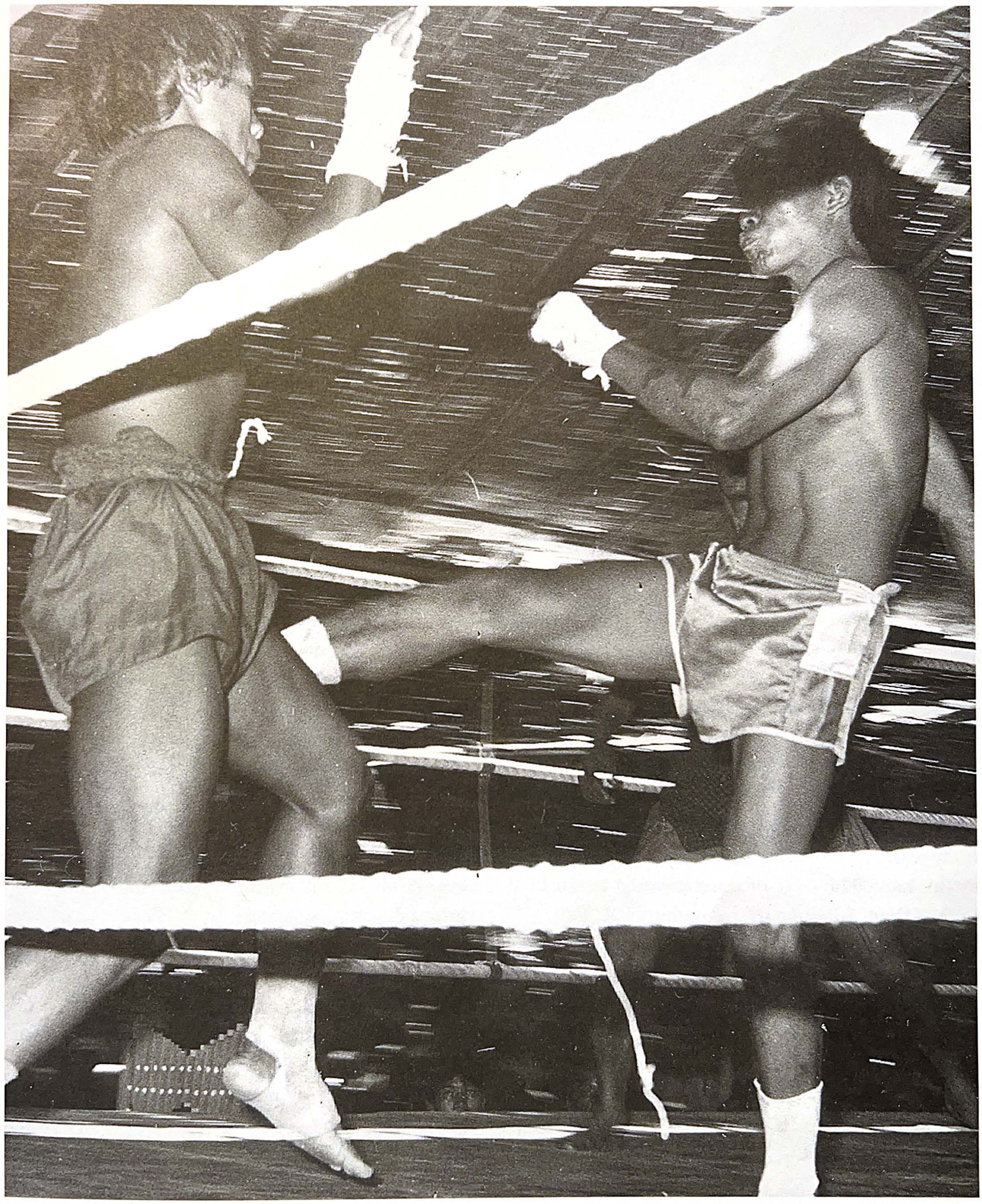


FIGURE 109: Low kicks are commonly seen in the ring. The main objective is to deliver several kicks to the same spot on the opponent's thigh. Some matches are even ended this way when one fighter cannot stand anymore.

FIGURE 110: Side kick execution.

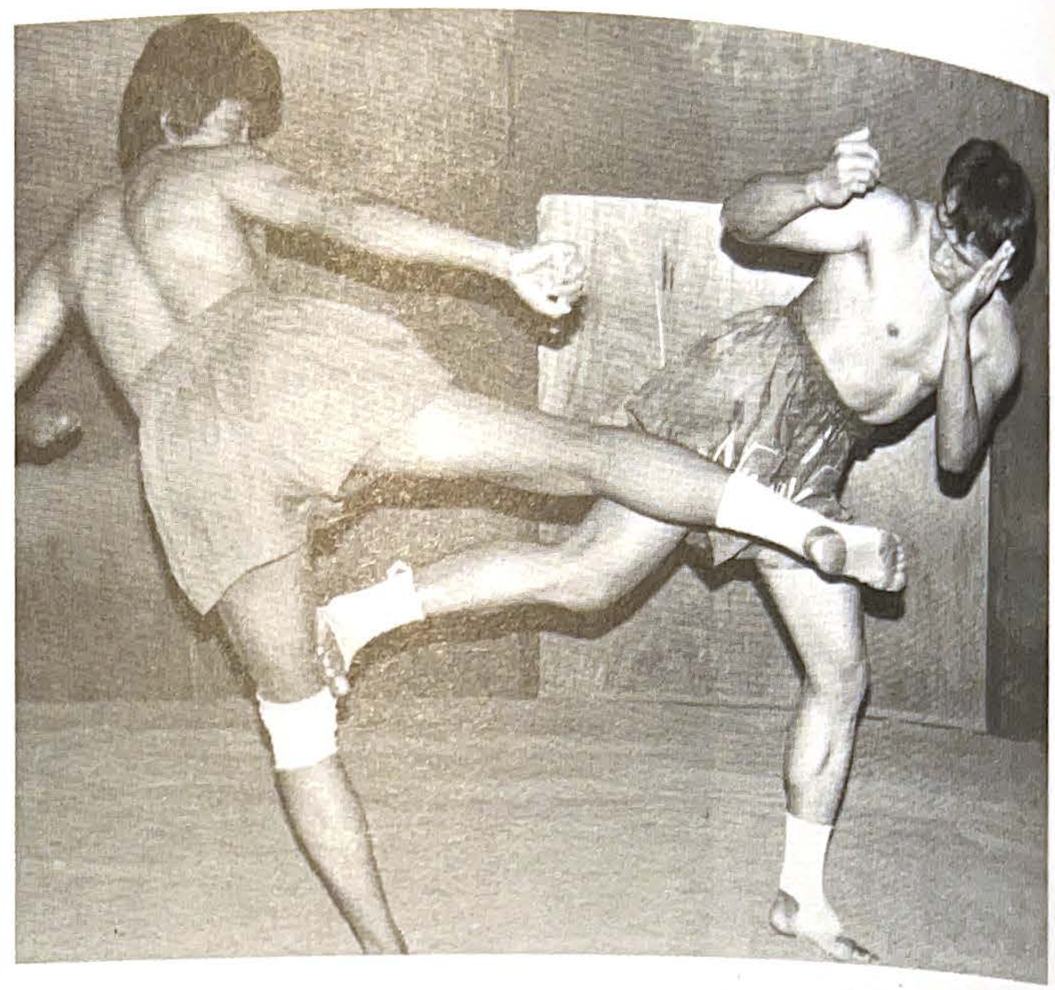


FIGURE 111: A side kick to your opponent's thigh is a very effective way of countering, especially against various high kick attacks. You can deliver such a counter by sliding or with a small jump to close on your opponent more quickly.

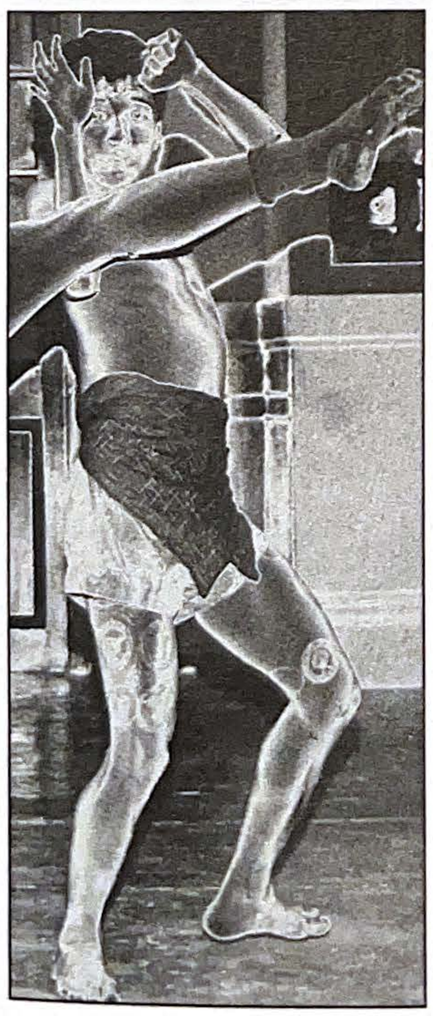
body must be extending in the same direction as the kick. The edge of the foot must never be higher than the knee of the kicking leg. The path of the kick toward the target is straight and the leg returns the same way back to the ground. It is best to practice this side kick while holding onto a wall and slowly going through each stage of delivery. This will give you a sense of balance while at the same time strengthening the muscles that contribute to the kick.

After practicing the kick in the air you can begin working on it with the bag and kicking pads. The side kick is used widely as a counterkick (Figure 111). It is usually aimed at the opponent's thigh (outside or inside) and only rarely at the body or head. The weak point of this kick is in the difficulty of combining it with hand techniques; however, its long range does provide a certain safety when performed.

This technique can be delivered in self-defense situations even if you have your back turned to your opponent. In that case the hitting surface can be the top of the heel (the execution remains the same). But this sort of back kick belongs only in the movies; the Burmese do not use it often in the ring. I do not recommend it on the street, either, if you have any other solution.

3 Blocking

There are several ways of blocking, deflecting, or avoiding the opponent's blows. As with striking techniques, blocking can be done with the arm or leg. Remember that in Burmese boxing blocking is always part of a counterattack; blocking techniques are never practiced separately.



Some of the blocks, aside from interrupting or stopping a blow, also serve to grab the opponent's arm or leg. Others, by inflicting pain, discourage the opponent from further attacks.

It is important to begin by learning how to block with both arms and legs. Figures 113 and 114 show how to block the opponent's punching attack with the palm and forearm; it is essential to deflect the punch to the side. This block is done with the open hand, the inward high parry, or upward when the block is done with the forearm.

In Figures 115 and 116 the fighter blocks while simultaneously grabbing the opponent's legs. If the opponent attacks with a round kick to the body, the body

FIGURE 112: A shin block is frequently used against low kicks.

is intercepted with your opposite elbow or lower arm (Figure 115) as you slip the other hand under the opponent's shin. With this hand (after blocking the kick) grab the opponent's leg and stop him from going low to the ground and taking a more stable position. Of course after such a block is done, there are many possible forms of counterattack and these will be discussed later.

If the opponent attacks with a round kick to the head, a similar form of blocking is used with a hold (Figure 116).

Figure 117 shows a double arm block, which is a must if you want to stop a strong kick in a real fight. The inside forearm block (Figure 118) is also good at stopping blows from the arm or leg, but don't forget to slide or lean backward for your safety.

The elbow block in Figure 119 is used exclusively against midsection kicking techniques. The downward elbow block is quite painful for the opponent and if it is delivered successfully several times, his leg techniques may be completely neutralized. It is good medicine against one-sided kickers.

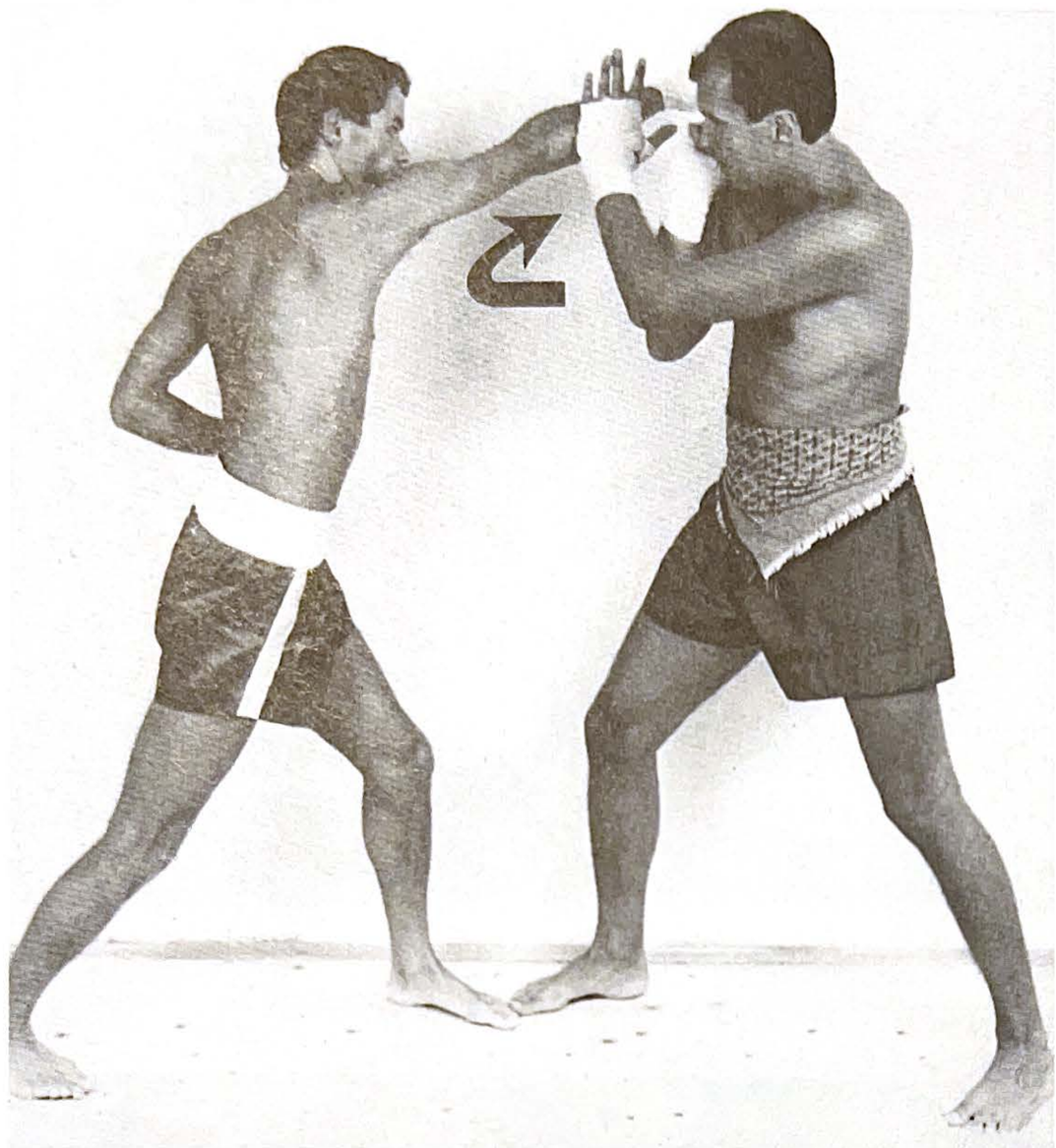
You must obey similar punching and kicking principles when executing any blocking technique; the moves are not done merely with the movement of the arm but by propelling the entire body, and here the rotation of the hips and body play a major role. Simultaneously with the blocking technique, you must prepare yourself for countering.

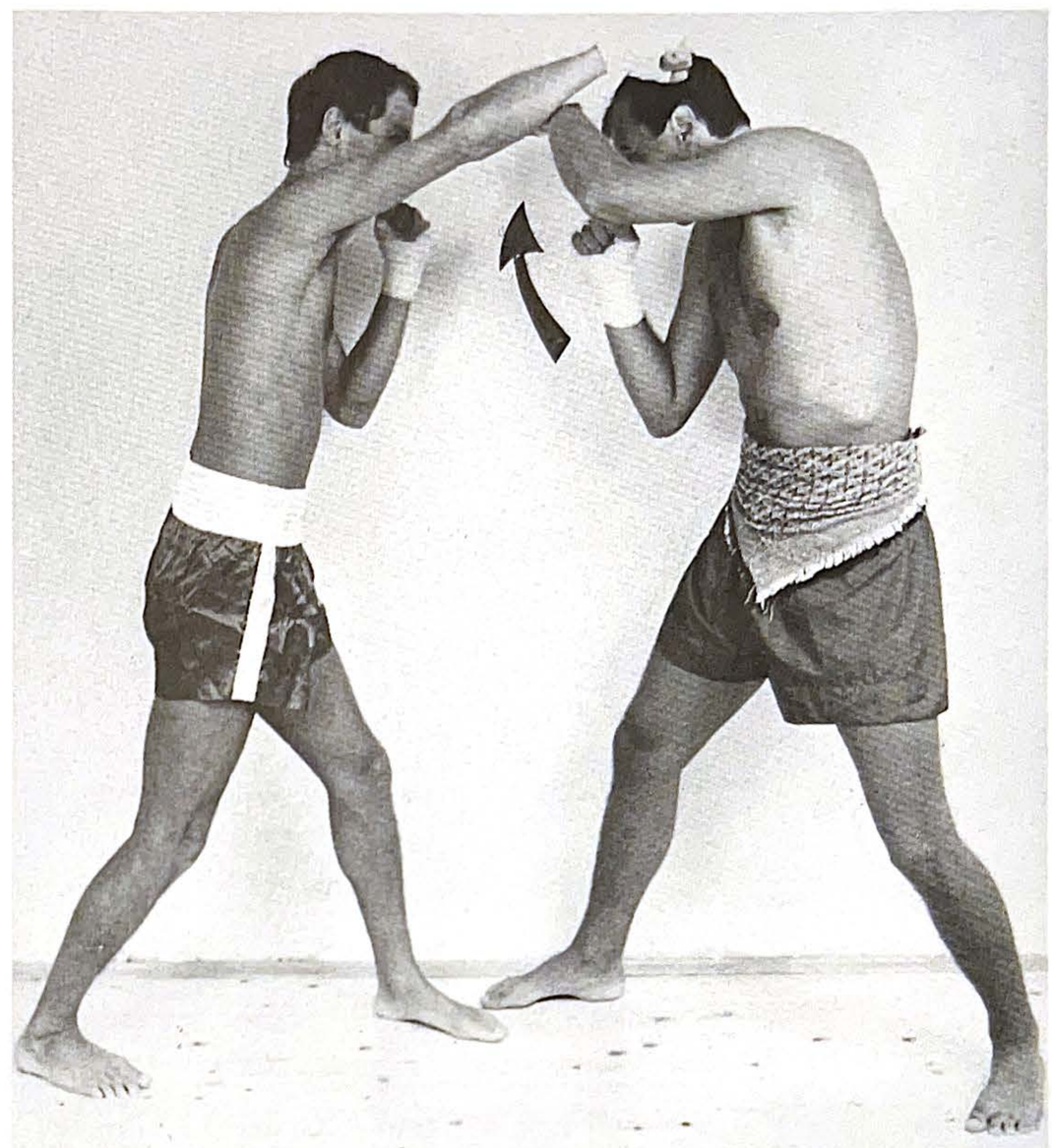
However, a good fighter will never waste too much energy blocking blows—especially the more powerful ones, which are sometimes quite hard to stop. He usually prefers to *evade* the powerful blows, which usually makes the opponent lose his balance and then use twice as much energy to stop the blow.

It is common to respond to the weaker and medium blows with strong blocks. Most of the kicks aimed at the body can be blocked using what we call "shin blocks," since the leg is stronger than the arm. Blocking strong kicks with the forearm sometimes means exposing oneself to the risk of injury.

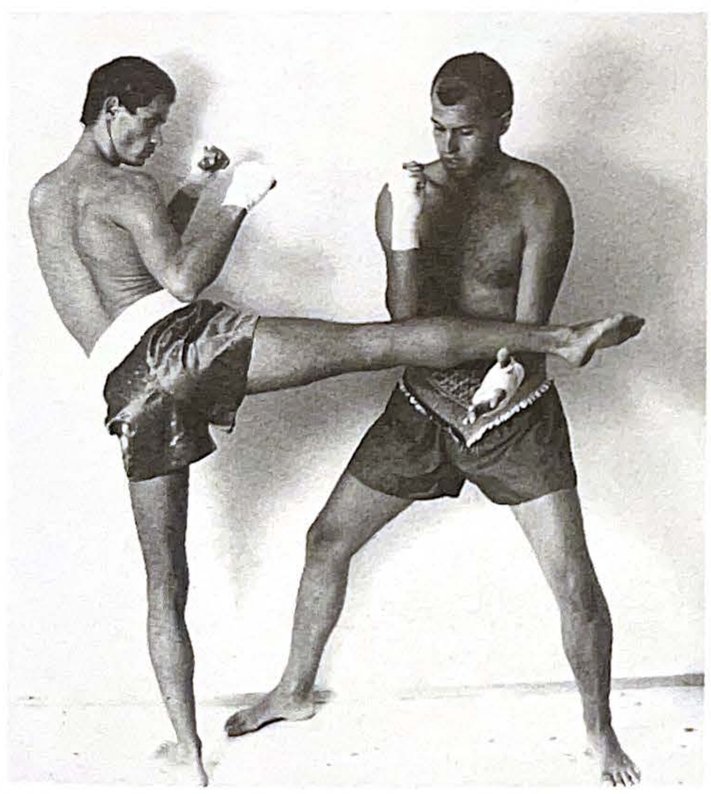
Boxers in Thailand use an almost identical blocking technique. The idea behind this type of blocking is that the more vulnerable parts of the opponent's leg should be blocked by the stronger parts of the fighter's leg. So you must hit the opponent's instep with your shin or with the edge of the foot, both of which are naturally harder than the instep. Your arms must always be held in front of your face to stop punches (Figures 120 and 121).

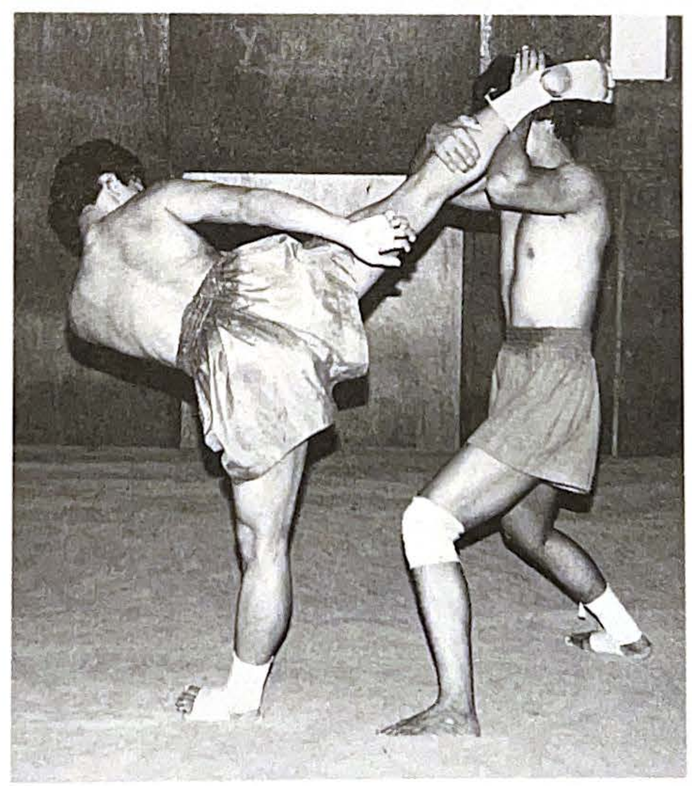
Figures 122 – 124 demonstrate how to block with the side and sole of the foot. The first two blocks are used exclusively for blocking various round kicks, while the last can be used against the front kick. The blocking technique shown in Figure 123 is particularly effective because you are simultaneously kicking the opponent's thigh. Several such blocks can mellow any high kicker. The block shown in Figure 124 is one of the sub-types of the side kick, and in this and similar blocks it is most important to stop the opponent's kick halfway there, before it has





FIGURES 113 AND 114: If you ask a Burmese fighter to show you his blocking techniques, he will not understand you. But if you ask for some examples of defensive techniques, you will see such blocks followed with counterattacks. Blocking and countering are inseparable.





FIGURES 115 – 117: With various blocking techniques you can deflect kicks. You can also grab your opponent's leg to further disable him.

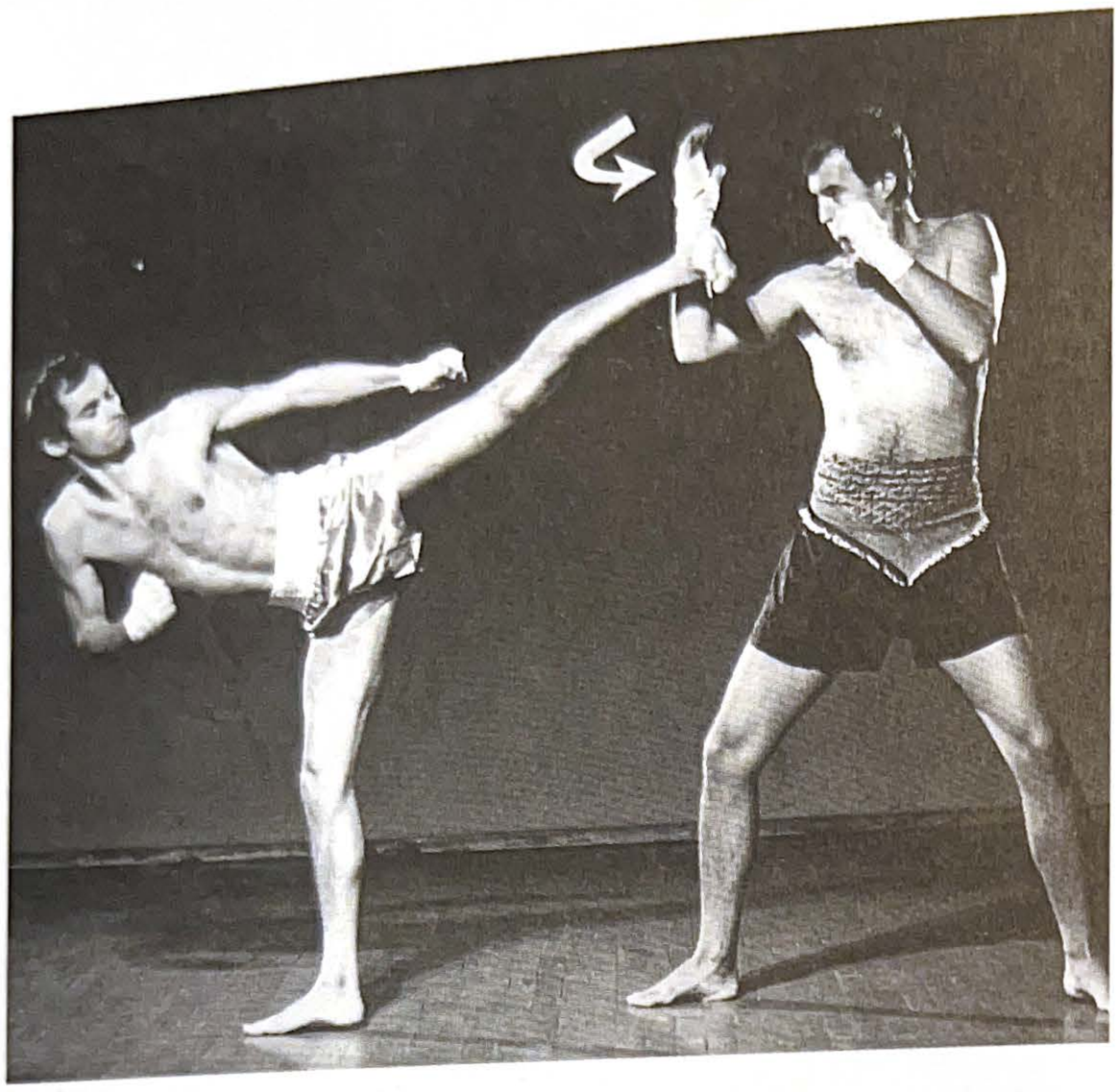


FIGURE 118: Inner and outer forearm blocks are standard techniques in Burmese boxing.

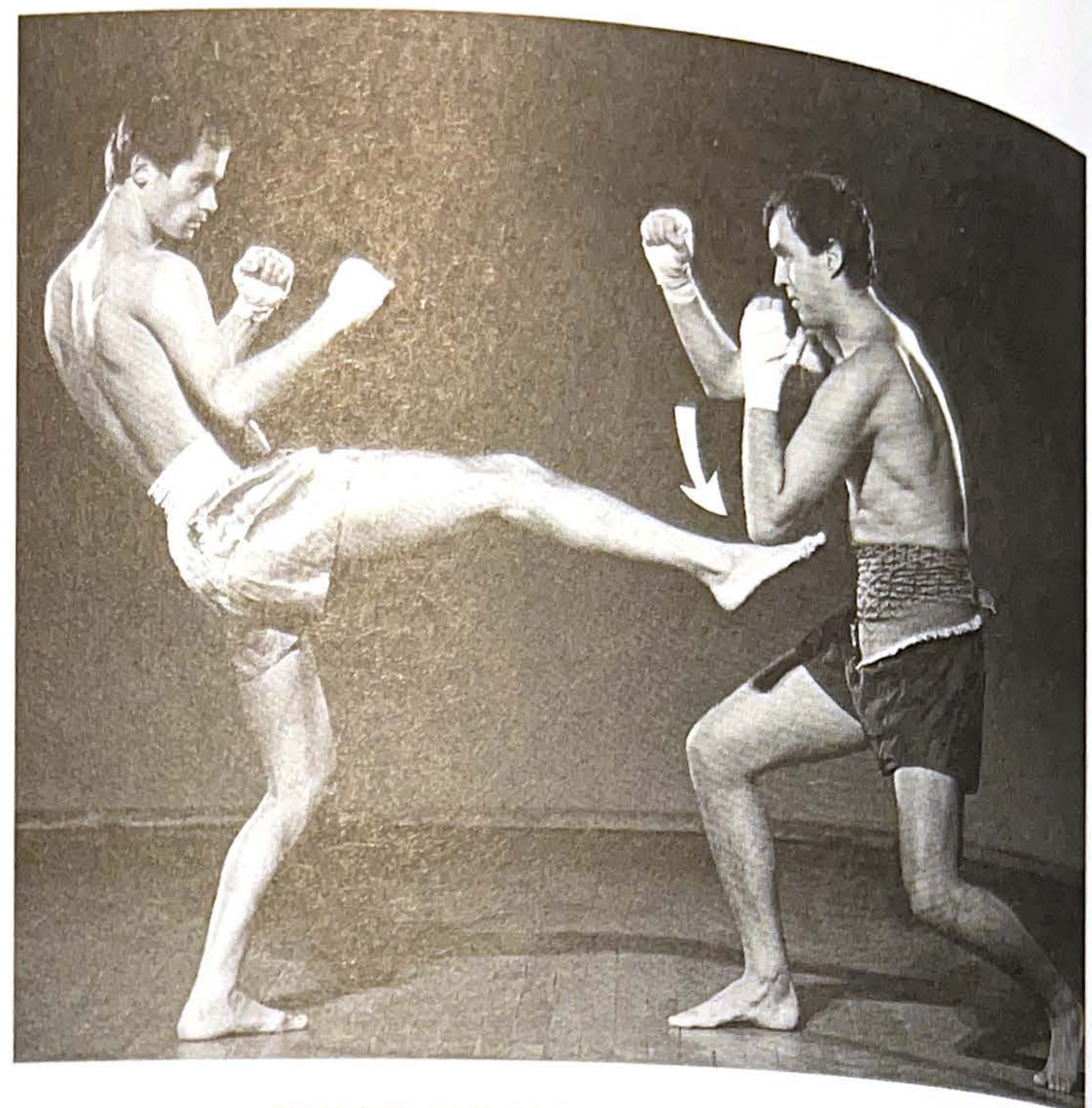
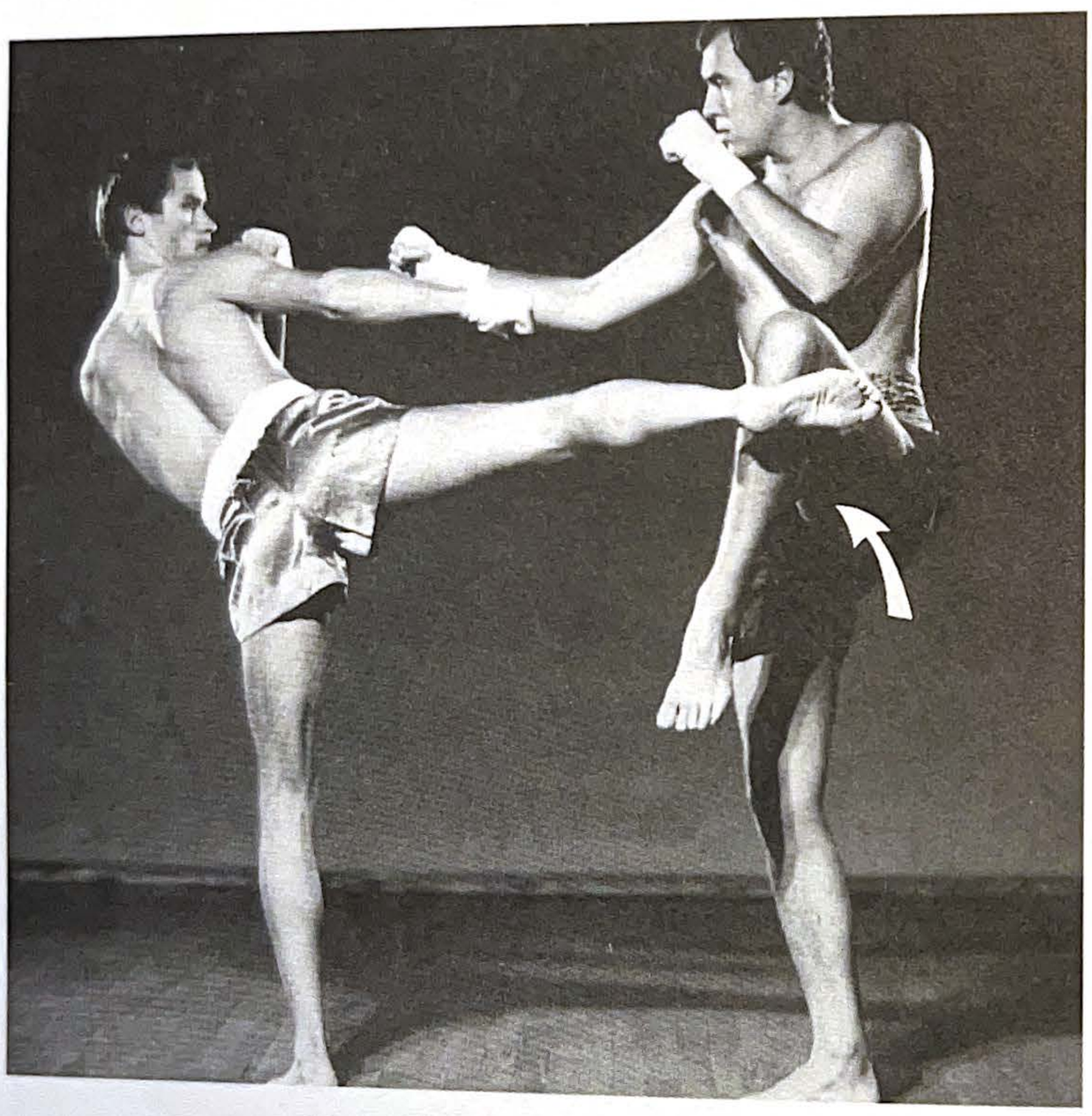
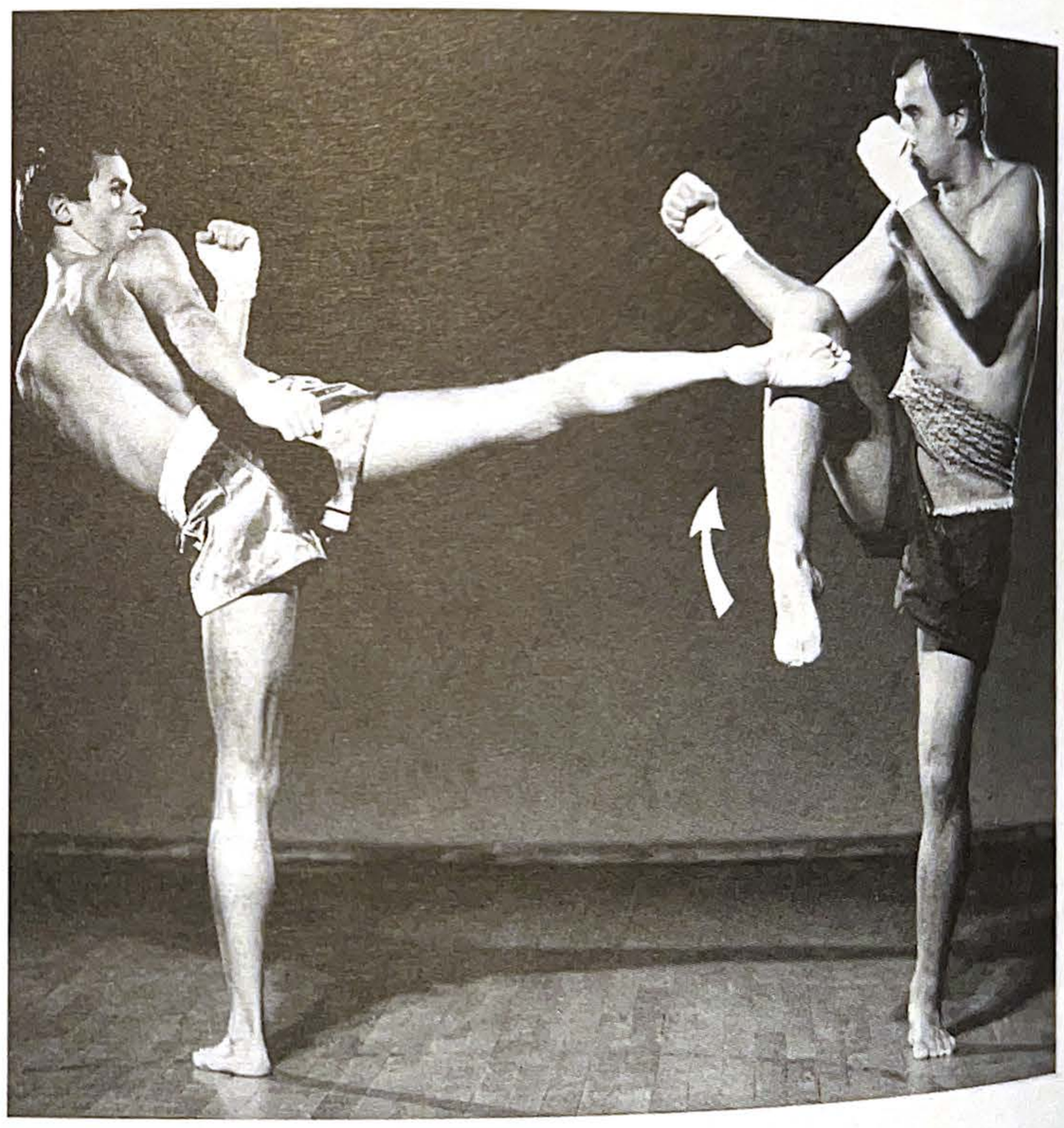


FIGURE 119: Using an elbow block is a good way to soften up your opponent.

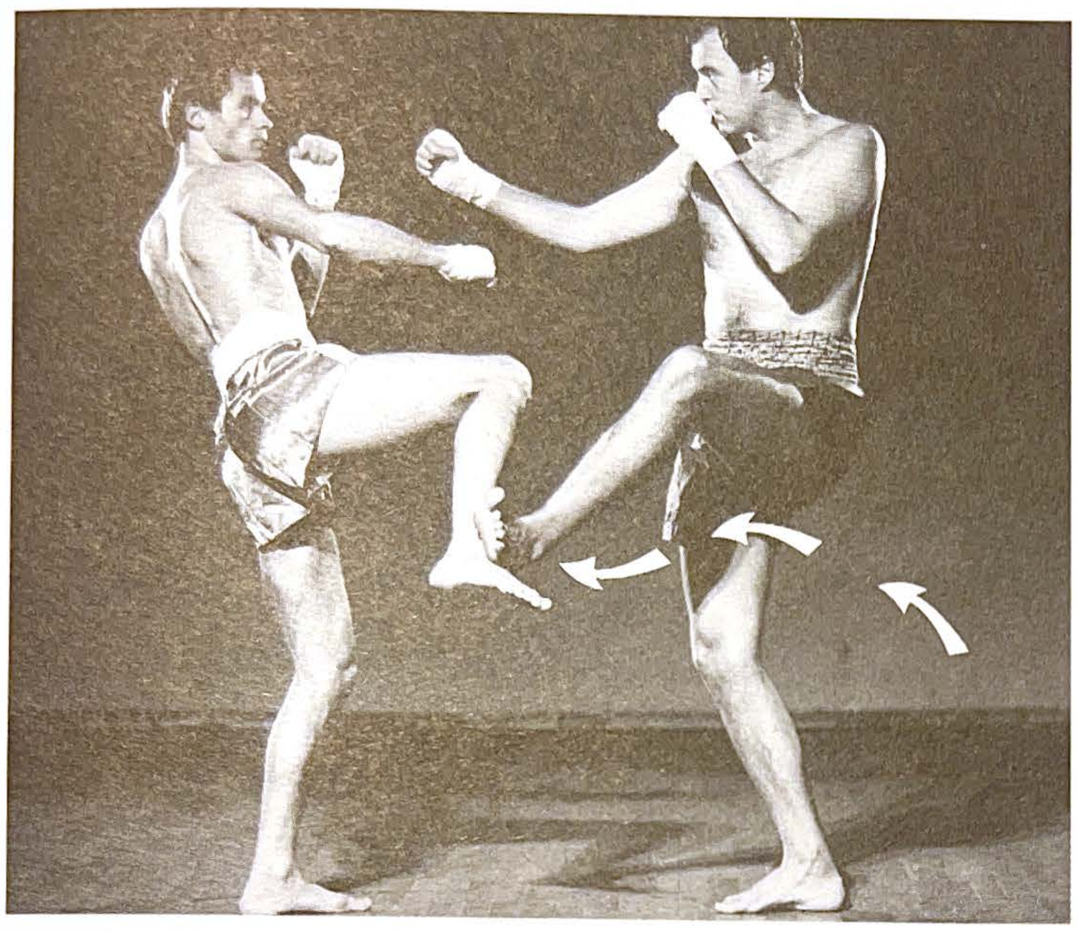


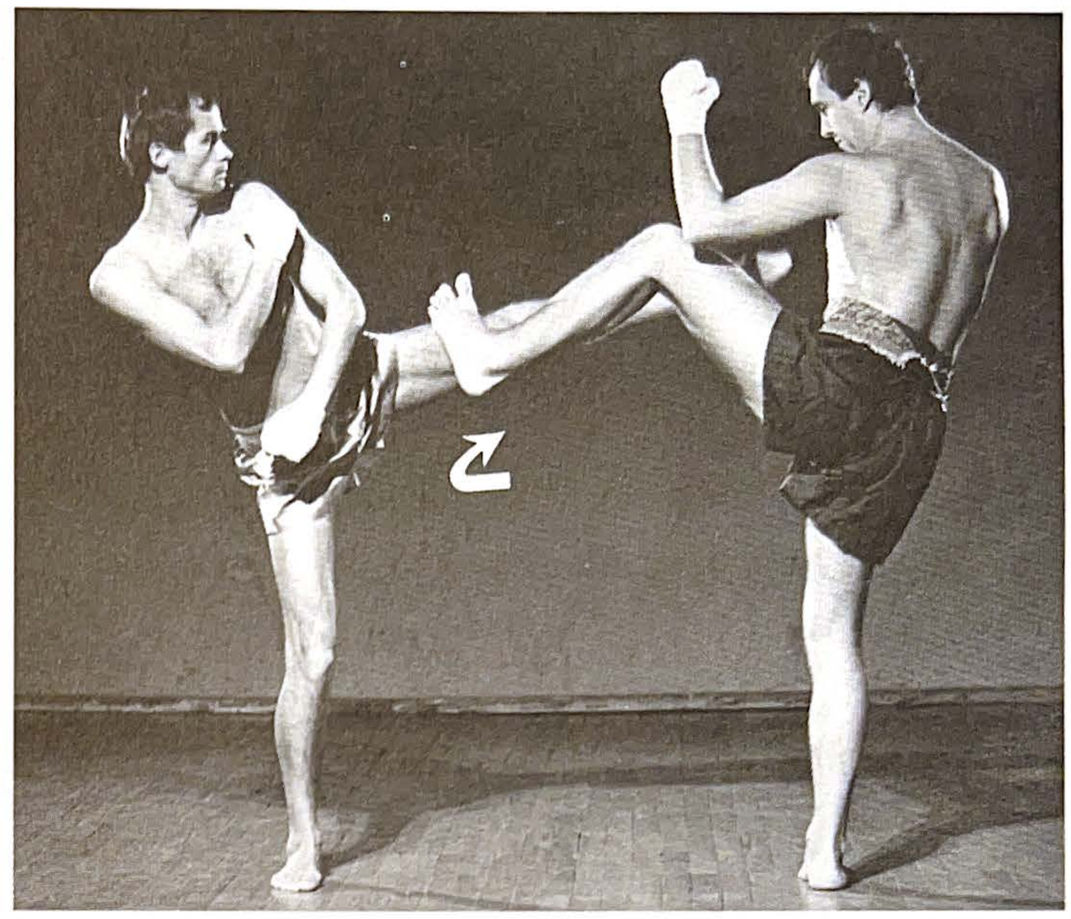


FIGURES 120 AND 121: Shin blocks (inner or outer) are used to stop low kicks and are performed just as in Thai boxing.

reached its full power. These are the most basic methods of blocking. More will be introduced in Chapter 5.

Remember that after every block during a training session you should immediately follow up with a counterattack combination. If you practice this way from the beginning you will have no trouble with sparring or free fighting.





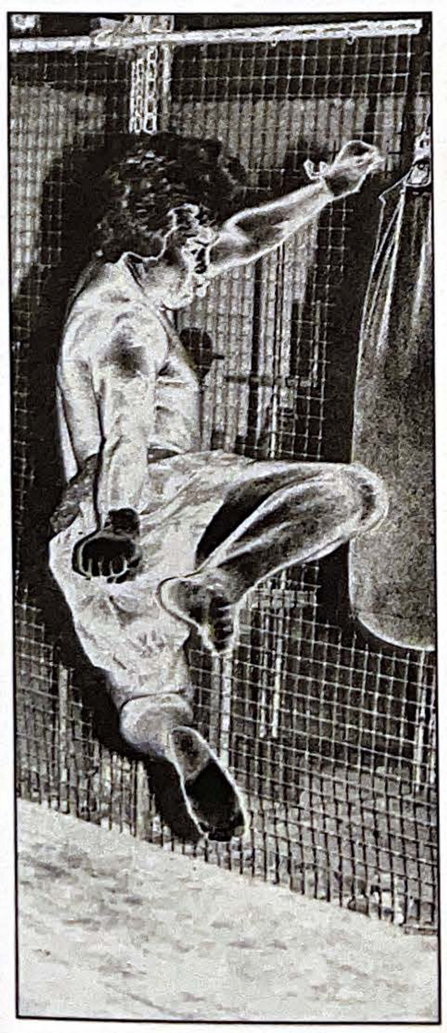
FIGURES 122 AND 123: If your opponent attacks you with kicking techniques you can prevent it with several different kinds of blocks. But if your opponent is in full extension, it is too late to block and you must evade or retreat. Then concentrate on intercepting his foot in midair while remembering to cover yourself.

FIGURE 124: This is another fine block/kick technique to soften your opponent. Keep your guard up and keep your body away from your opponent's reach by leaning away from him.

4 Training

TRADITIONAL TRAINING METHODS

Traditional Burmese boxing has remained unchanged for centuries and has retained certain ancient training methods to this day. These methods will be described because they offer deeper insight and understanding of one of the oldest martial arts in the world. But before I describe these practices, I should explain that some of these methods must be considered within the context of the time in which they first appeared, when there were none of the modern aids that are now used in training. Many of these methods are gradually vanishing or cannot be recommended, but their value is indisputable, since generation after generation of Burmese boxers have been trained this way.



We know that this is one of the roughest fighting sports in the world, where a match between two boxers is virtually identical to a real fight. It is therefore no surprise that much importance has been placed on the hardness of

FIGURE 125: The typical on-guard position in Burmese boxing.

FIGURE 126: Pagoda in Bagan Valley (Valley of 5,000 Pagodas).

the hitting surfaces, strength and stamina, and the ability to receive a beating. The Okinawan styles of karate have cultivated similar training methods.

In early texts on Burmese boxing this advice comes up frequently: "The fist must be as hard as a coconut." One of the most popular methods to achieve this hardness was by hitting an unripe coconut (hanging from a rope) until it was cracked open!

Burmese boxers used to work out at sunrise, often along a river or lakeshore. Many boxers could be seen punching their fists into the river mud and then opening and clenching their hands. This exercise is an excellent method of strengthening the hold and increasing the power of a punch.

The neck grip (chouda) was exercised on a palm tree. A fighter would stand in front of a tree that was roughly as big around as a man's neck, grab the tree, and clench his fists over and then rotate with his forearms. This is quite

a painful exercise, but after some time the inner forearms would harden.

As in karate, the force of a blow was tested by chopping objects, usually stones or fired clay bricks.

To strengthen the kicking surfaces on the leg, a fighter would kick a tandy fruit, which is harder and larger than a coconut. And for centuries now in Burma, young boys have all learned to play a popular game called *chin lon*. In this game, three to six players stand in a circle and try to keep a hard, woven twig ball up in the air with their feet. The ball can be hit with all parts of the leg and also with the head, so this is an excellent way to develop firm and flexible legs. It often requires real acrobatics and as a result many of the Burmese have no problem learning and mastering the kicking techniques. (In Thailand the game is known as *takrow*.)

Aside from these exercises a great deal of emphasis was placed on swimming, jumping, practicing kicks and punches in the water, and running. Movement exercises are practiced in water up to the knees, which requires additional effort because of the water's resistance. The exercise known as "the monkey wheel" was also popular: the body bends backward from an upright position until the hands touch the ground. This exercise strengthens the body and increases flexibility of the spine.

In early manuscripts there are instructions on practicing what are known as "flying kicks." Various kicks were to be delivered mid-jump, at heights of 3 and 4 1/2 feet with a large number of repetitions. Climbing palm trees was recommended for strengthening the arms and legs, and special sorts of falls were practiced. Some surfaces on the body and head used to be hardened over time by numerous light punches. (I saw some boxers hitting themselves lightly on the chin, jaw, and cheekbones.)

Nutrition and sleep were closely supervised and mixed with religious practice. A sort of sparring was practiced as a prefight exercise in which blocking was not allowed.

In closing, please remember the words of an old boxer who says that he acquired most of his skills the hard way: he learned from his opponents.

MODERN TRAINING METHODS

How can a fighter master striking and blocking in the shortest possible time? How can various techniques be combined successfully? How can you acquire strength and speed? Only by constant training of course. Be aware also that without good training methods (and of course, a qualified trainer), you may train for years without making real progress.

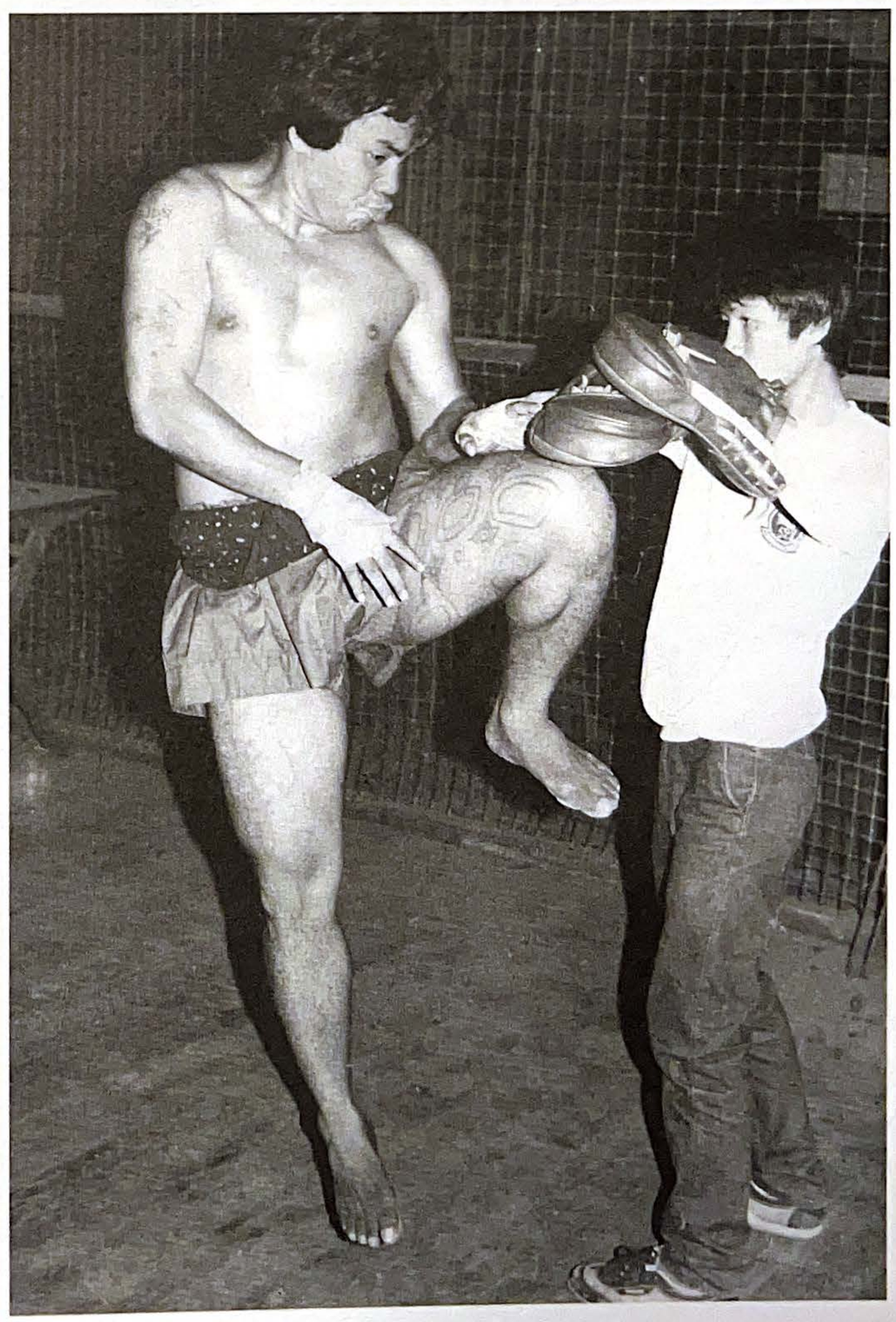


FIGURE 127: Using pads to practice a flying knee kick.

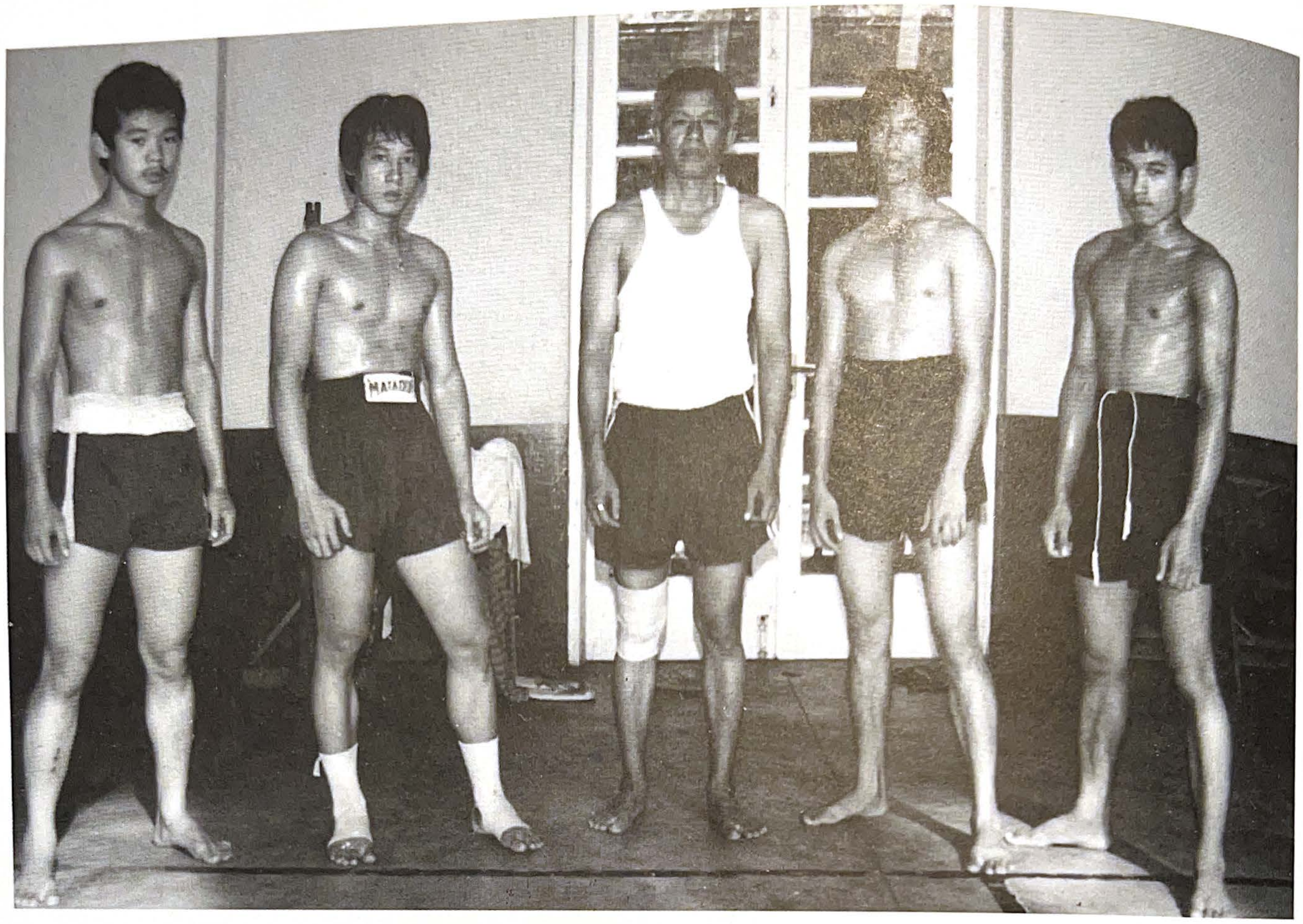


FIGURE 128: Saya Thaung Nyunt with some of his best students.

Modern training methods in Burmese boxing are based on the use of the bag, which is used to increase the power of punches and kicks, and kicking pads, which are excellent for developing speed and perfecting the sequence of blows through various combinations. Practicing with pads is far more dynamic than working out on the bag and, in the opinion of many Thai and Burmese teachers, it deserves more attention. But do keep in mind that we are still far from a real fight. The bag and pads do not know how to block and hit back, so sparring and real fighting experience is the ultimate authority.

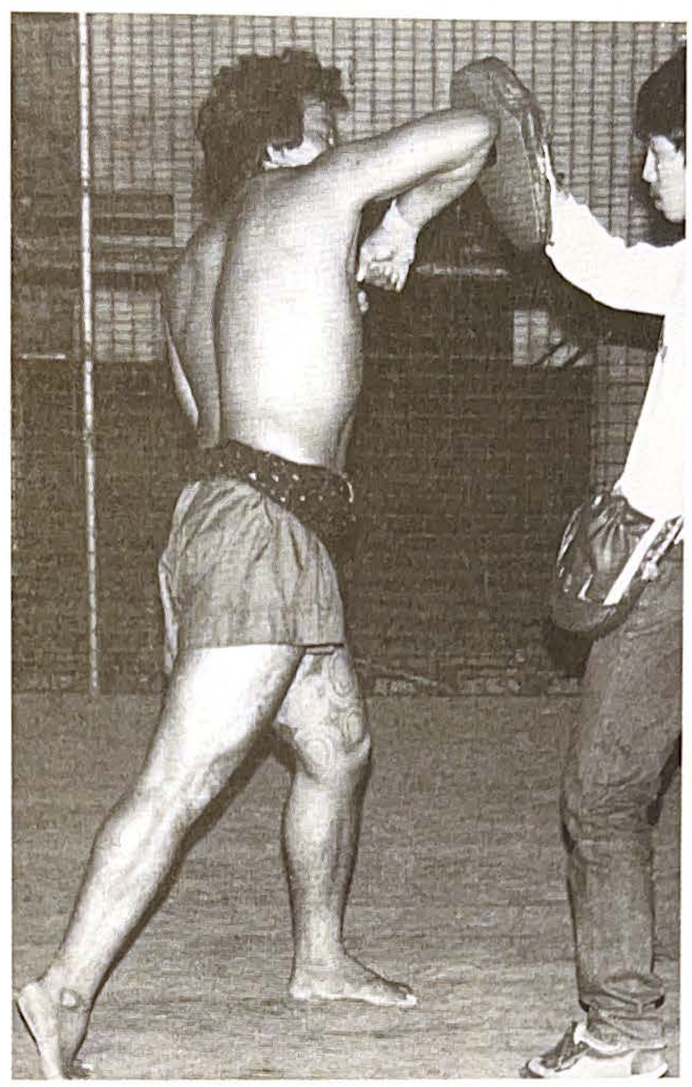
Kicking and Punching Pads

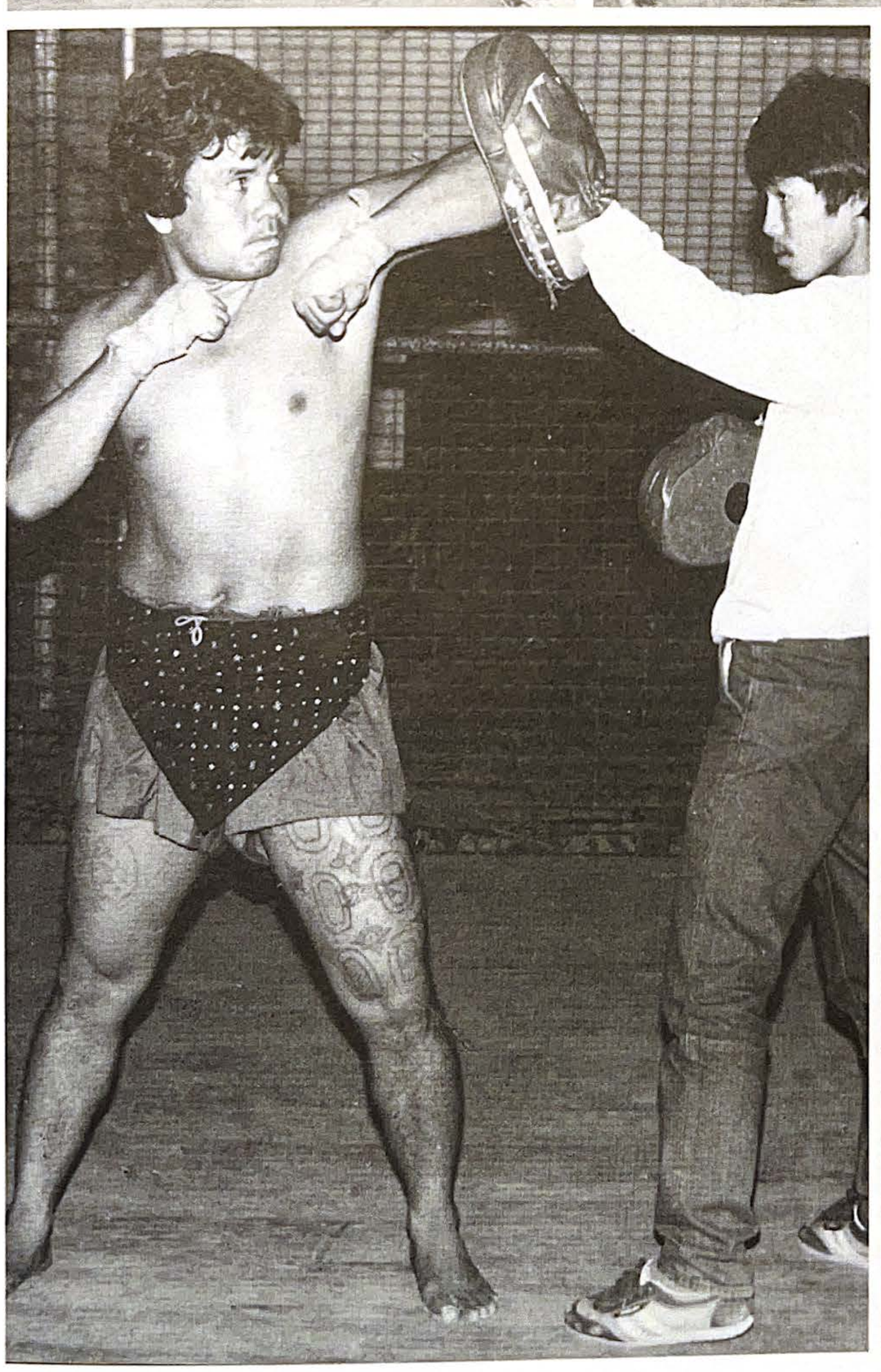
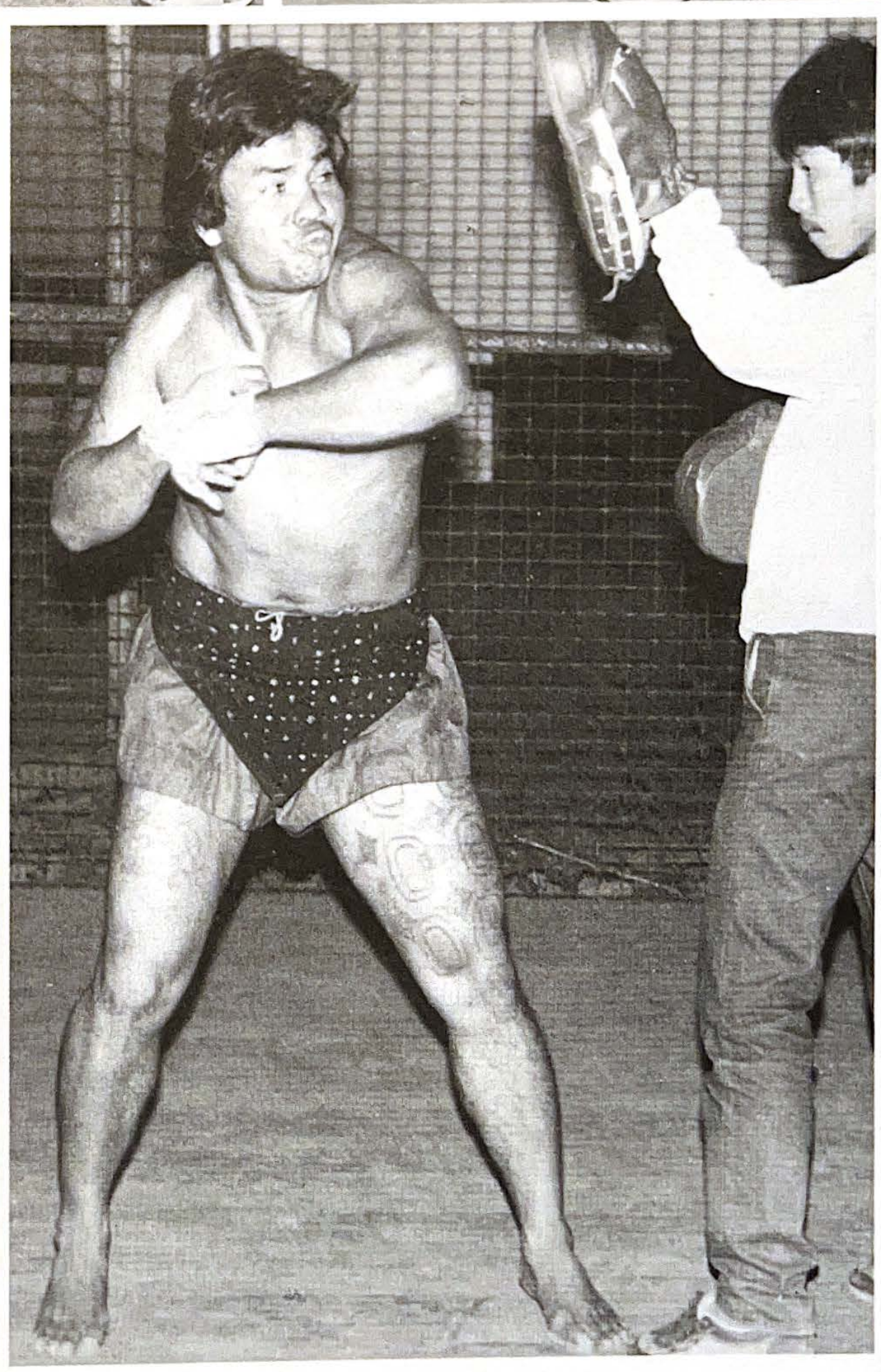
Exercises with kicking pads are pointless if the basic techniques have not been mastered. Before combining various attack-and-defense tactics, it is important to be relaxed and to learn to adapt the speed of the delivery of each technique to the shape you are in.

Understandably, combinations should first be practiced slowly, increasing speed as you improve. Punches can be delivered by forcing the partner to retreat or by reacting when he alternately raises and lowers the kicking pads. All the time you must be in motion—left and right, shuffling forward and backward.

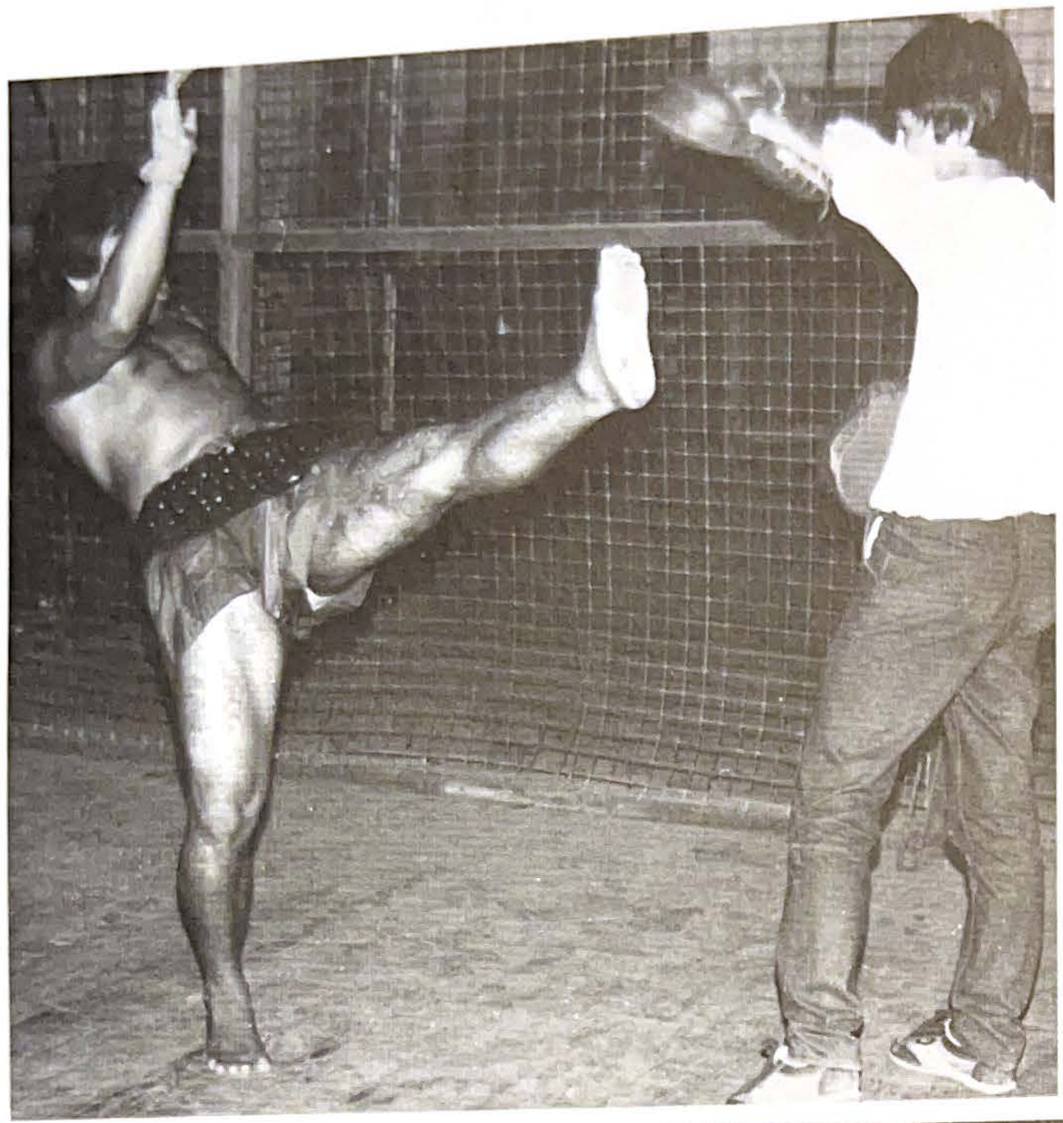
As far as the combinations themselves are concerned, it would be impossible to cover all of them. The combinations in Figures 129 – 140 must therefore be understood as basic examples that you can use to create your own versions.

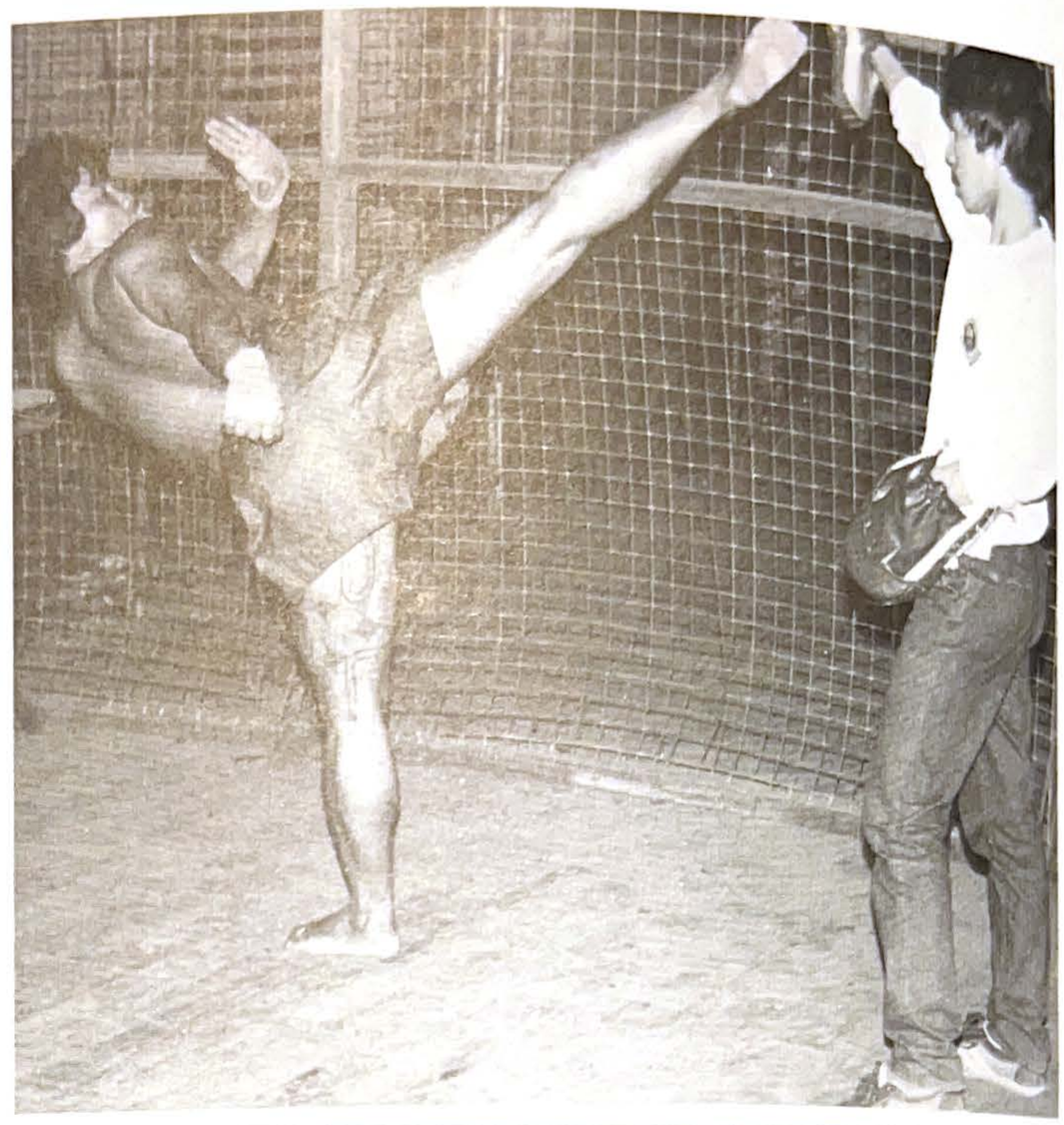
In the final stage, when you are able to execute combinations at full speed, your partner can fake some attacks or try to counter if he considers your attacks to be too slow.



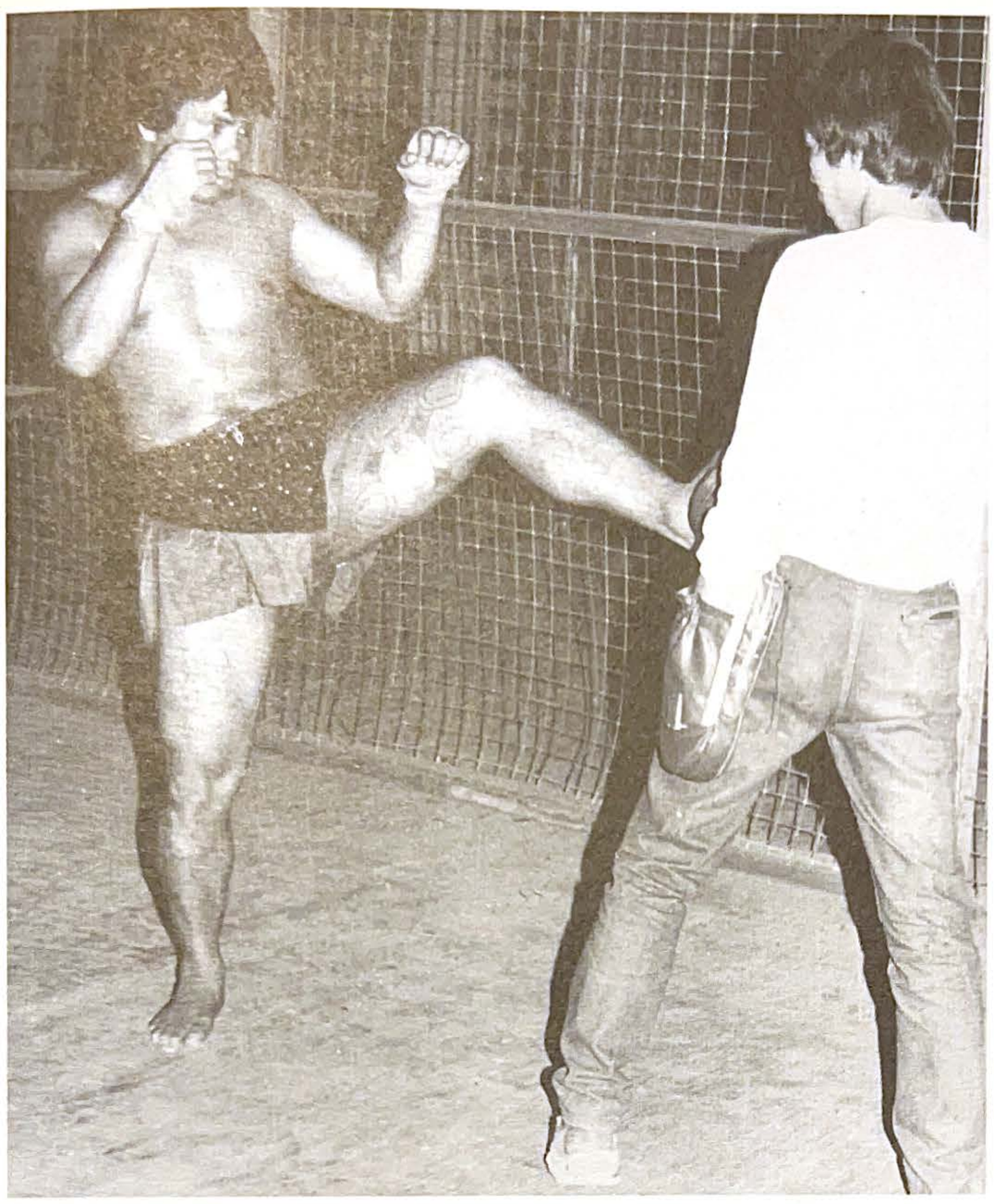



FIGURES 129 – 133: Start the combination with a left jab followed with right and left elbow strikes.
Notice the full-force execution of semicircular elbow strikes

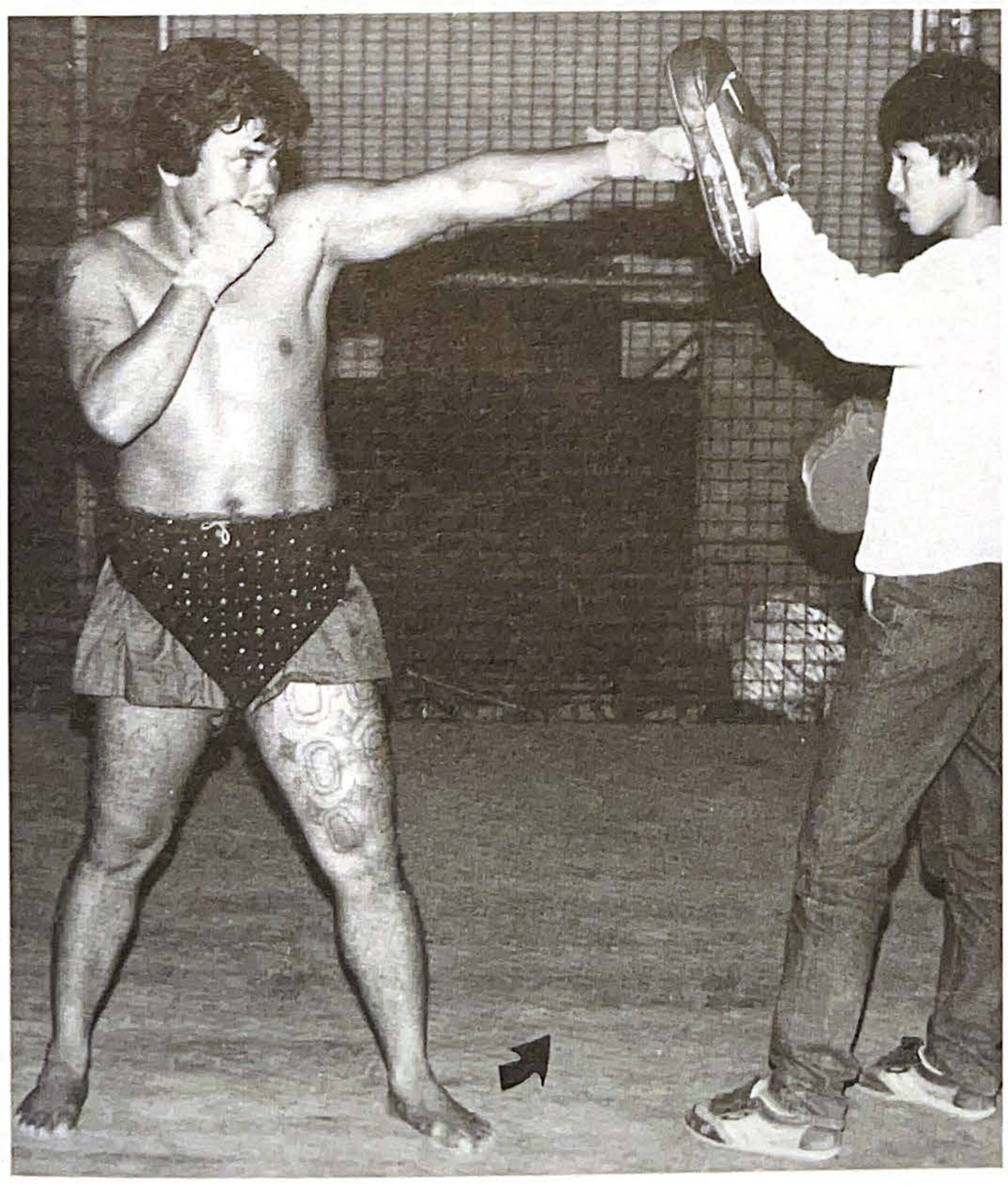


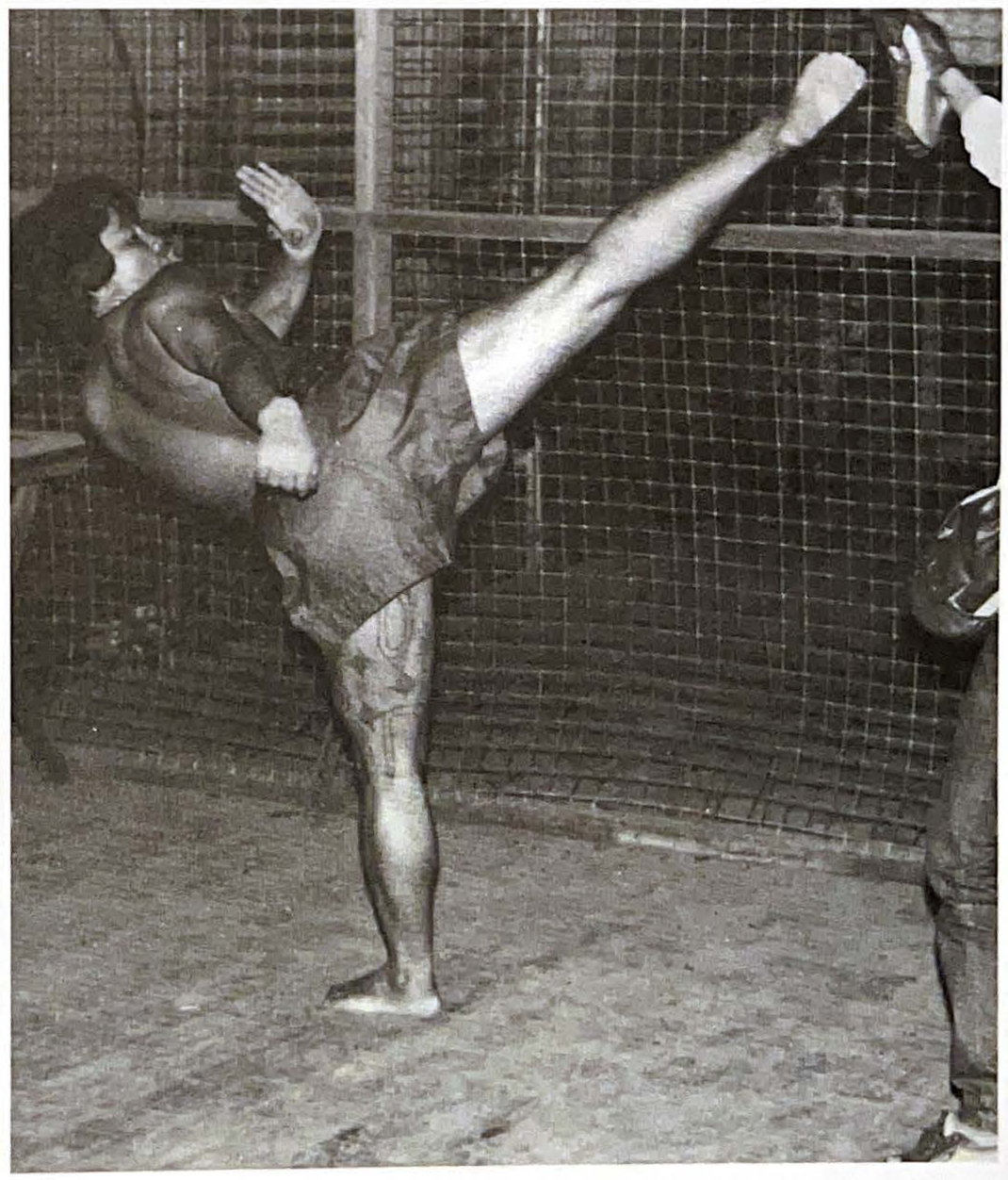


FIGURES 134 – 136: Start with a front heel thrust and follow with right and left round kicks. Keep shuffling forward as your partner retreats. This is a very dynamic combination that is difficult to show in photographs.



FIGURES 137 AND 138: Here is another dynamic combination: execute a front kick, followed by a flying knee kick. Use the momentum of one or two steps before jumping. Notice the position of your opponent's arms, staying alert to possible counters after you land.





FIGURES 139 AND 140: Punching and kicking combinations are most effective.
Start with a left jab, shuffle forward a bit and immediately execute a high round kick.

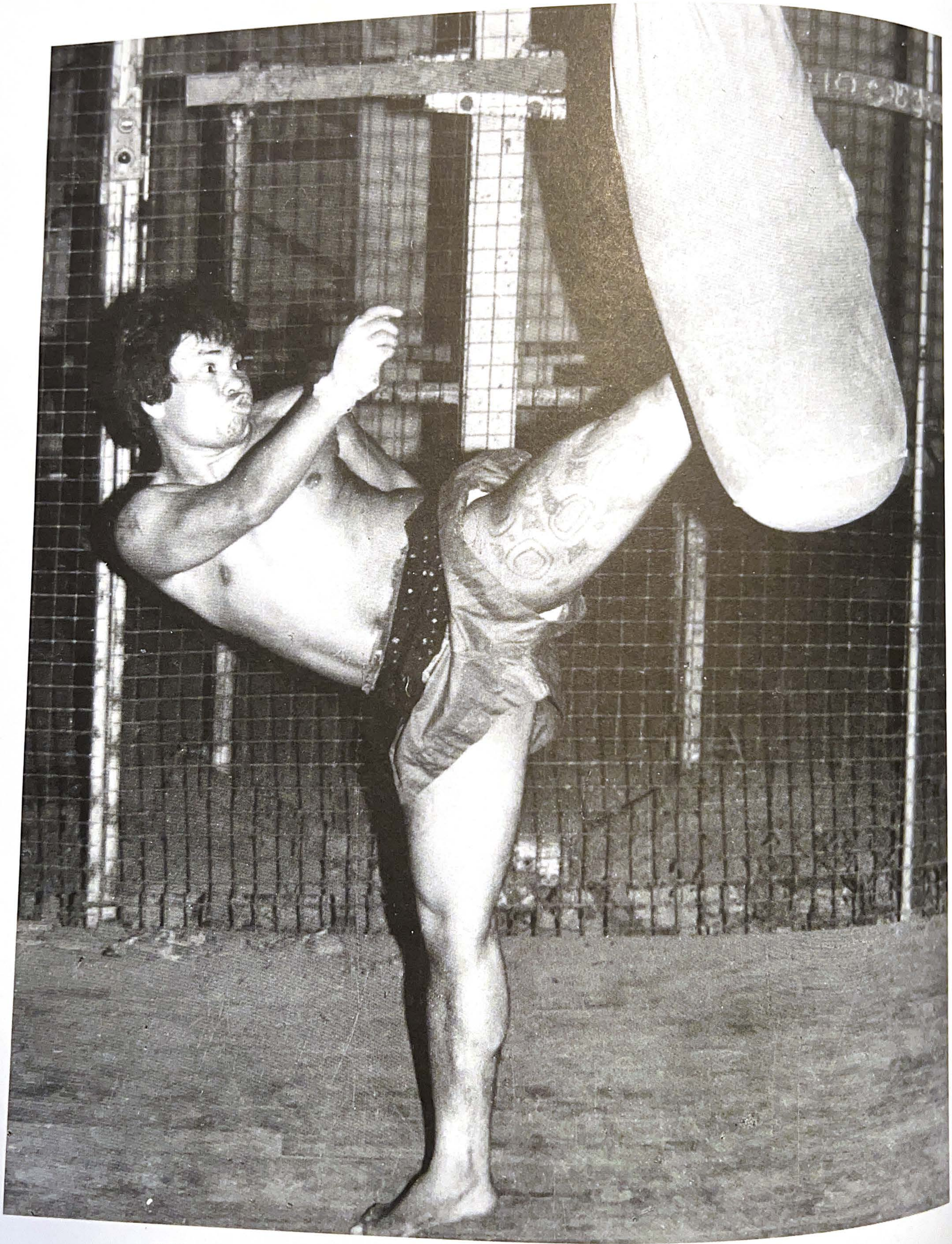


FIGURE 141: Even though it may become boring, I encourage you to spend a lot of practice time just kicking round kicks—high and low, left and right.

Sometimes he must put you in difficult positions so that you can find your own solution with different blocks, kicks, and punches. Some mutual understanding between partners or with trainer must be established for the best results.

The Bag

Many combinations can be practiced on the bag. One of the advantages of using the bag instead of a training partner is that you can deliver blows at full power on the bag. If the blow is weak, it means you are making a mistake somewhere in delivery and should correct it. The Burmese fill their bags with sawdust so that they are quite hard, which does not prevent them from hitting with all their might, feeling almost no pain. Recently, though, they have started using "softer" bags filled with leather and textile scraps.

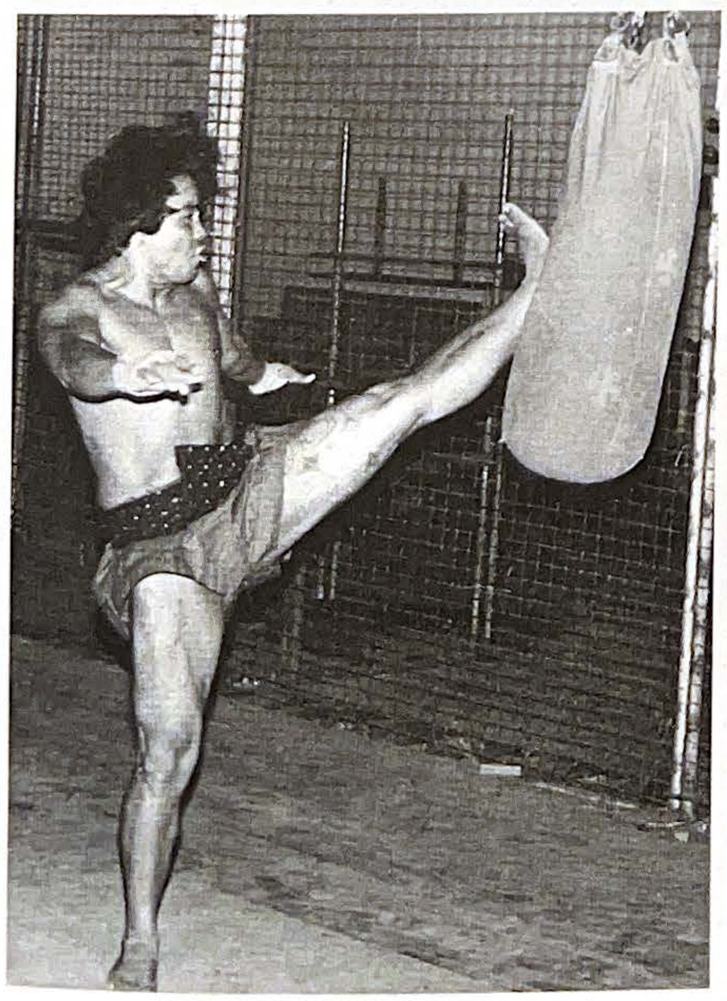
Anyone who intends to be ready for a fight must sweat quite a bit while using the bag. Furthermore, when you train at the bag your knees, shins, fists, and elbows gradually get harder and turn into real weapons.

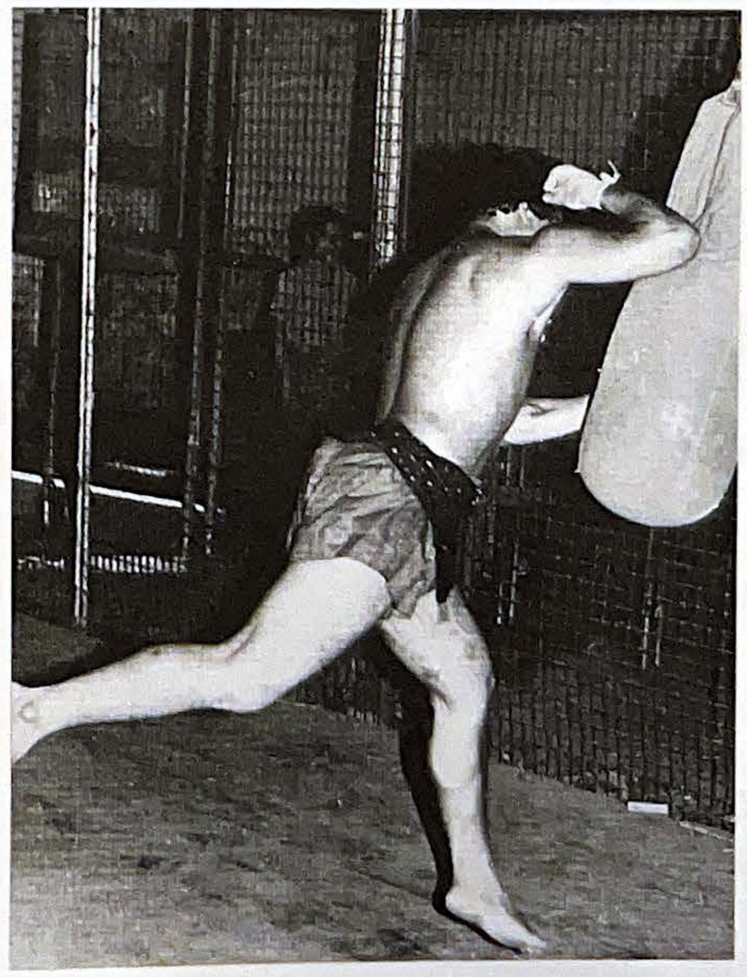
Begin using the bag about halfway through your workout when you are thoroughly warmed up and be sure to wrap your fists with bandages. If you try to train at the bag when not warmed up properly, you are sure to injure yourself.

When delivering blows, remember that a good hit "cuts" the bag so that it hardly moves at all. If it moves too much, this is a good sign that something is wrong with the delivery of the blow and that you are wasting energy pushing the bag. This is the mistake most common among inexperienced students—they continue to push the bag after delivering the punch or kick. (For this reason, it is best for beginners to avoid the bag.)

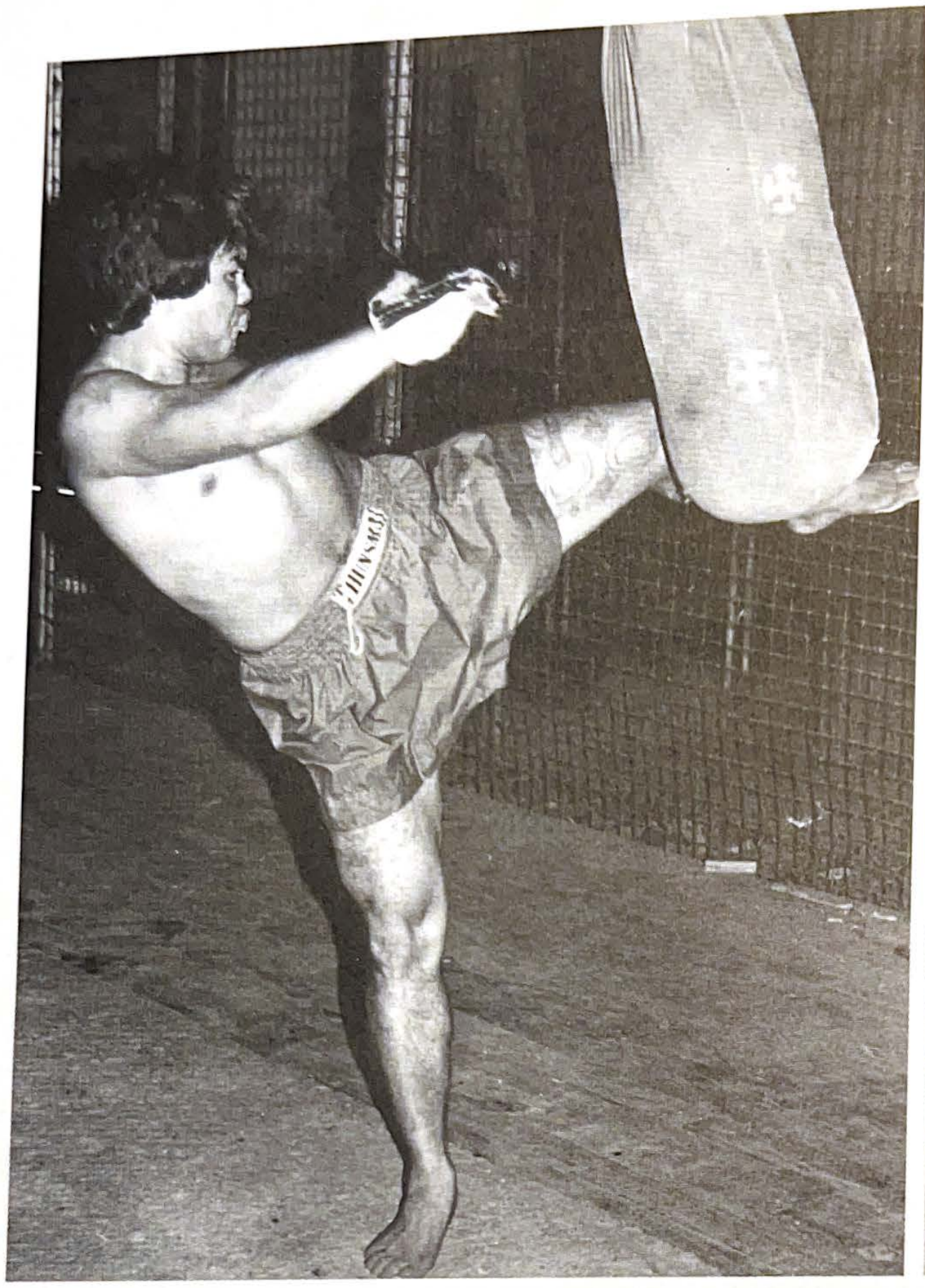
Train in several rounds and in the last round repeat combinations intensively until you are completely exhausted.

Cultural note: Some of the bags used by Burmese boxers have a well-known figure drawn on them: a cross with four arms known to us as the swastika. I want to make special mention of the fact that this is an ancient Oriental symbol that dates back to neolithic times as a symbol of happiness and the sun wheel. The word swastika comes from the

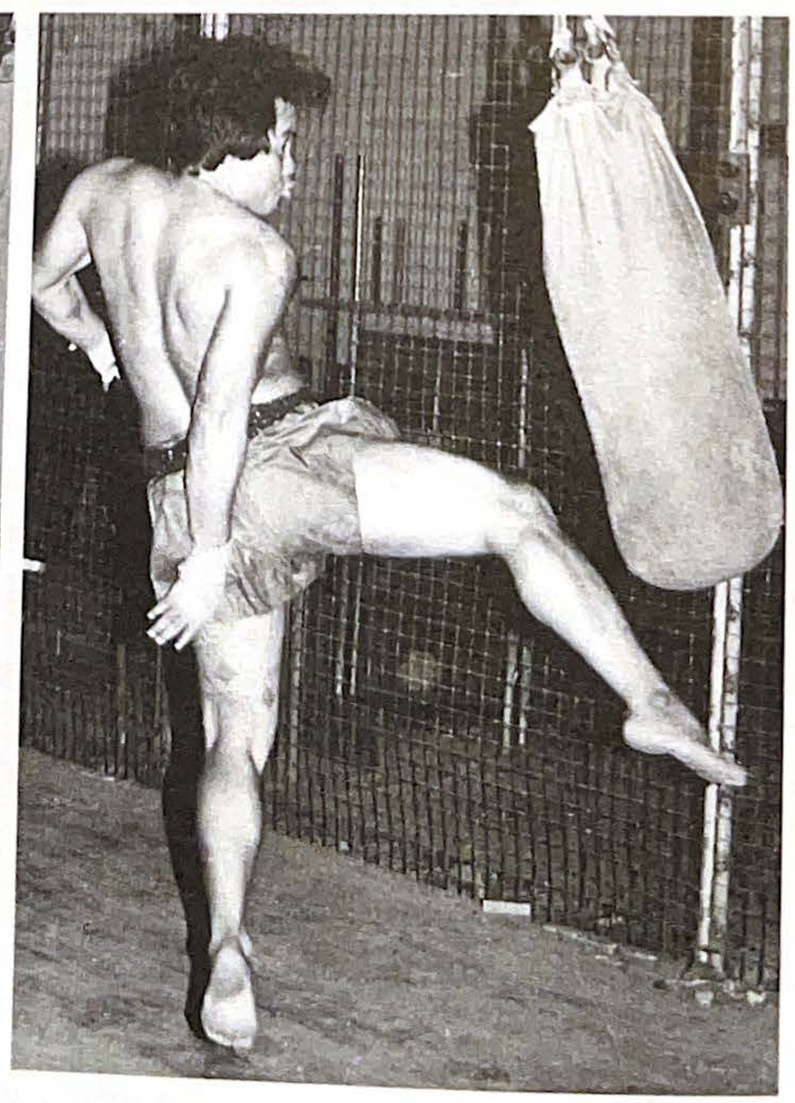




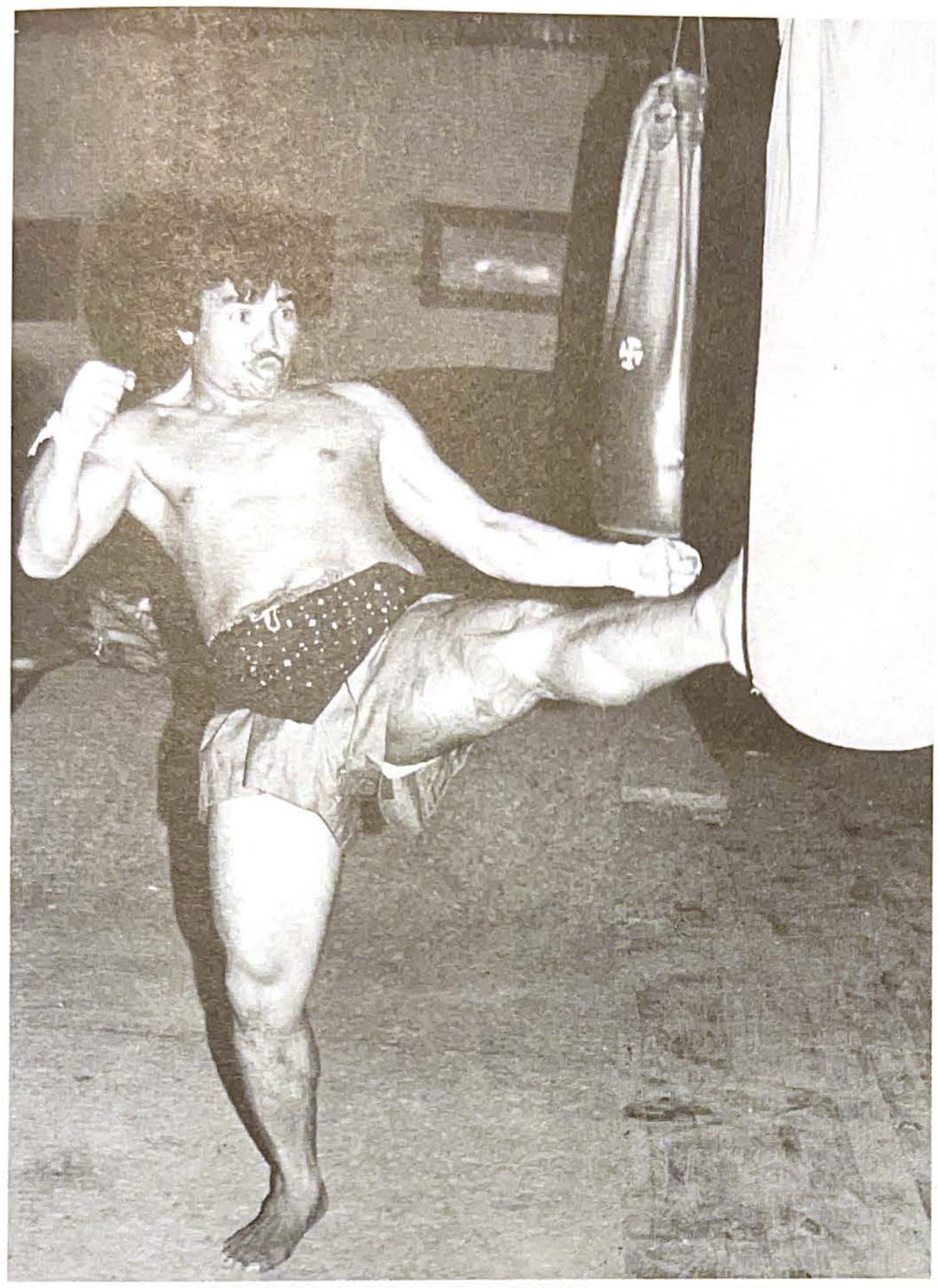
FIGURES 142 – 144: Start with a high front thrust followed with a round kick and a jumping elbow smash. Circle around the bag in an on-guard posture; at the right moment and distance repeat the combination.

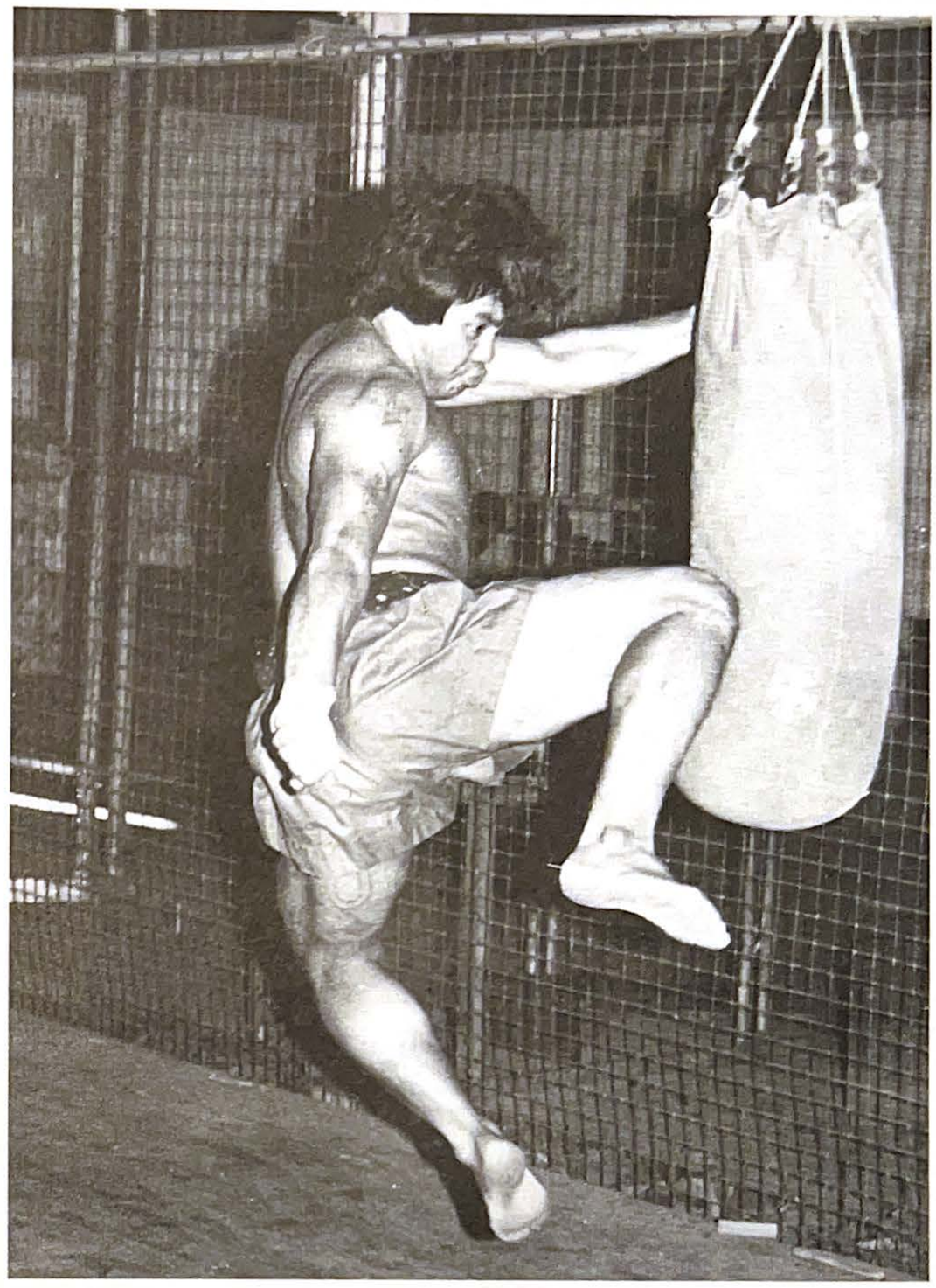


FIGURES 145 AND 146: Experienced boxers will tell you that there are some in and out combinations. For example, execute a powerful left round kick and escape out with a short left jab. Such tactical combinations are performed when you didn't succeed with your initial attack or when you want to turn his attention downward to punch high, or vice versa.

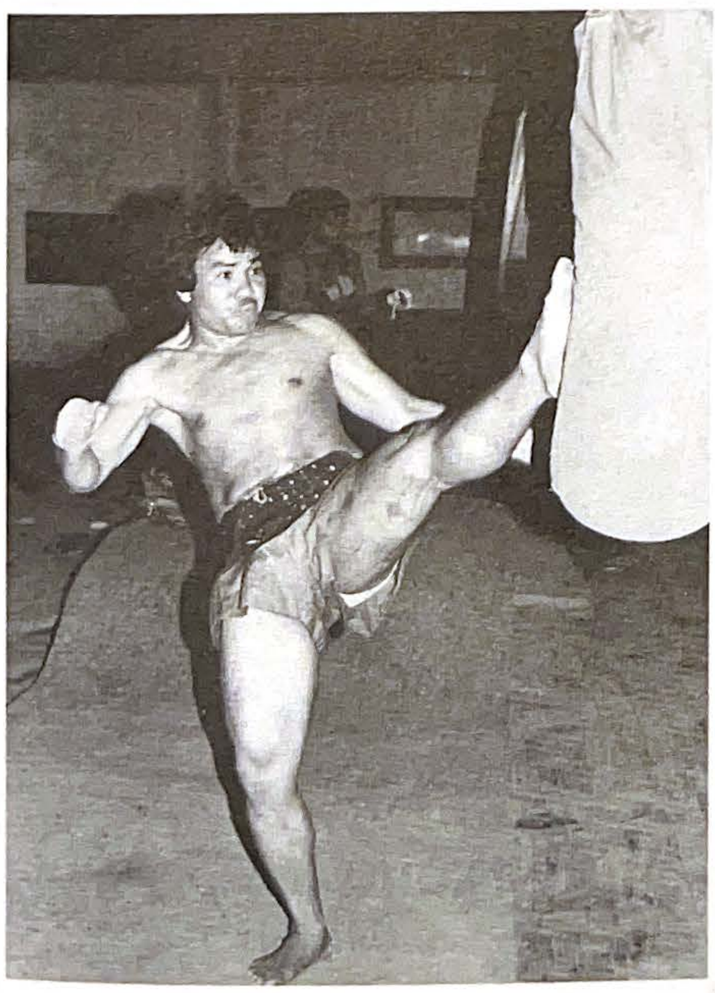


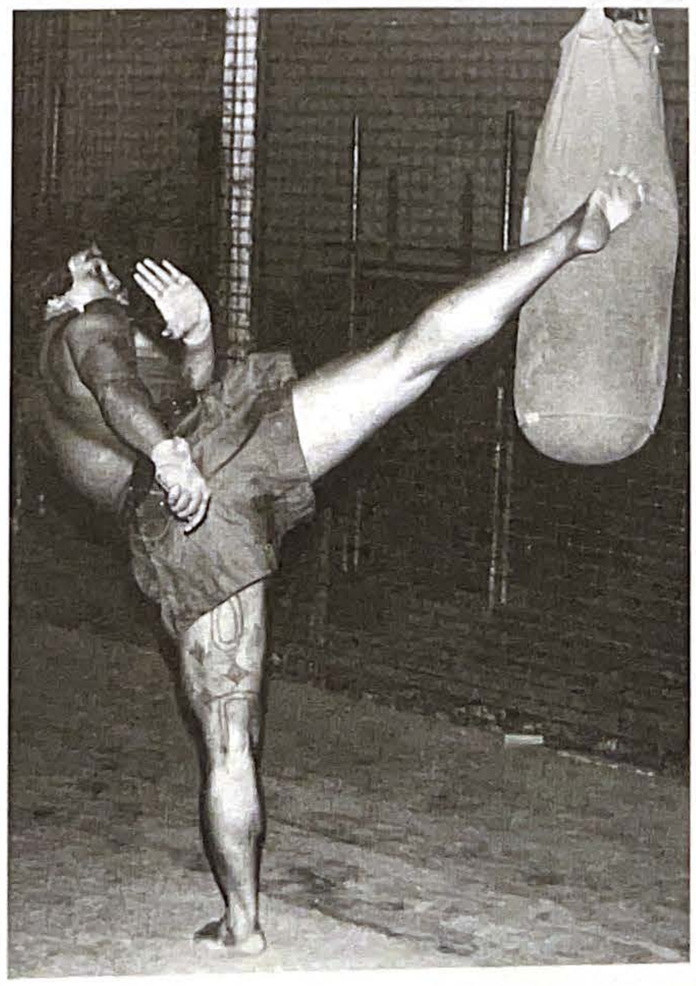
FIGURES 147 – 149: Start with a front thrust followed with a right knee kick and finish the combination with a jumping elbow smash. Notice that you alternate low (knee) and high (elbow) attacks, which is always a good strategy to confuse an opponent. This is, in fact, the essence of all combinations—attack low and high, left and right to disturb your opponent's defense.

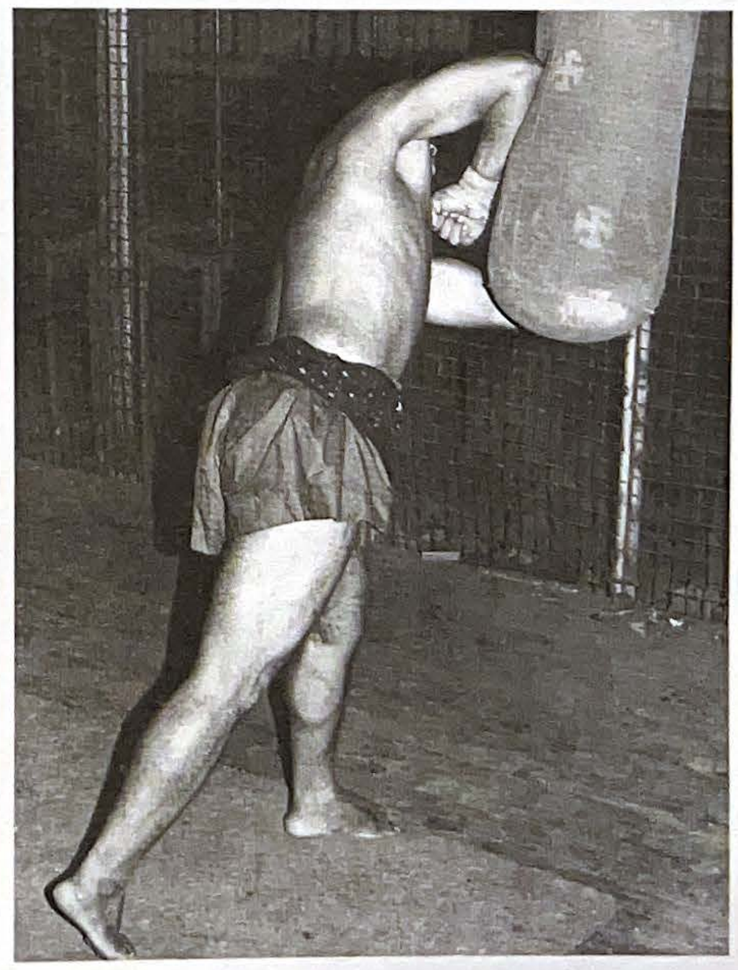




FIGURES 150 AND 151: Start with a front heel thrust followed by a flying knee kick.
This is a quick and effective combination, providing your opponent does not retreat in time.

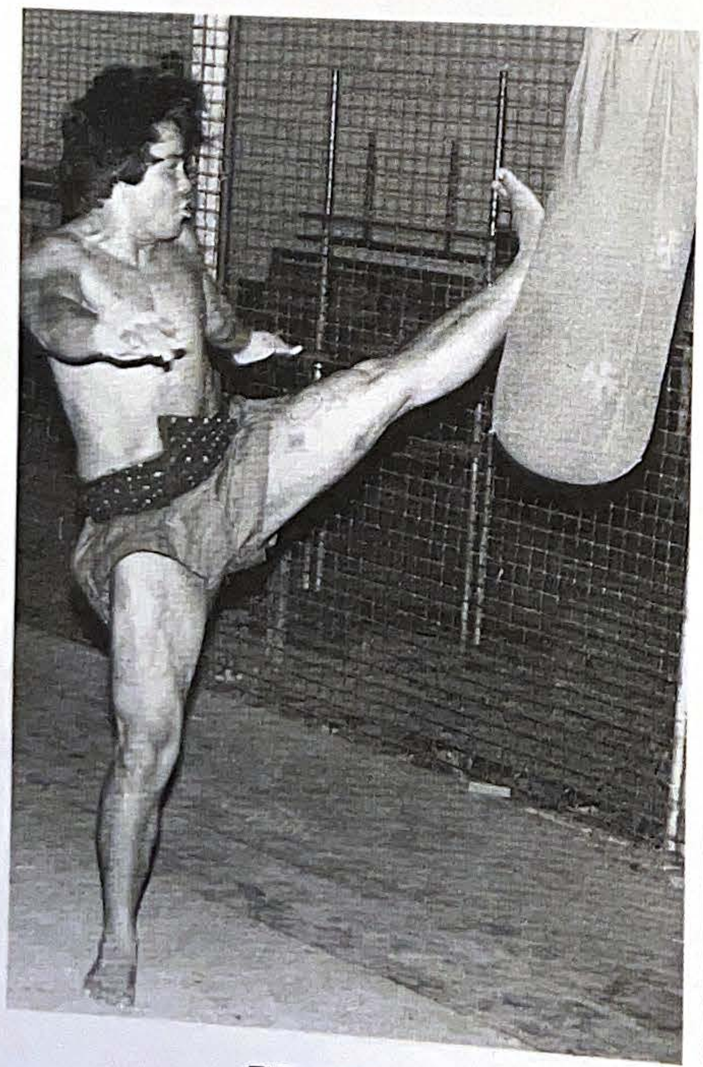


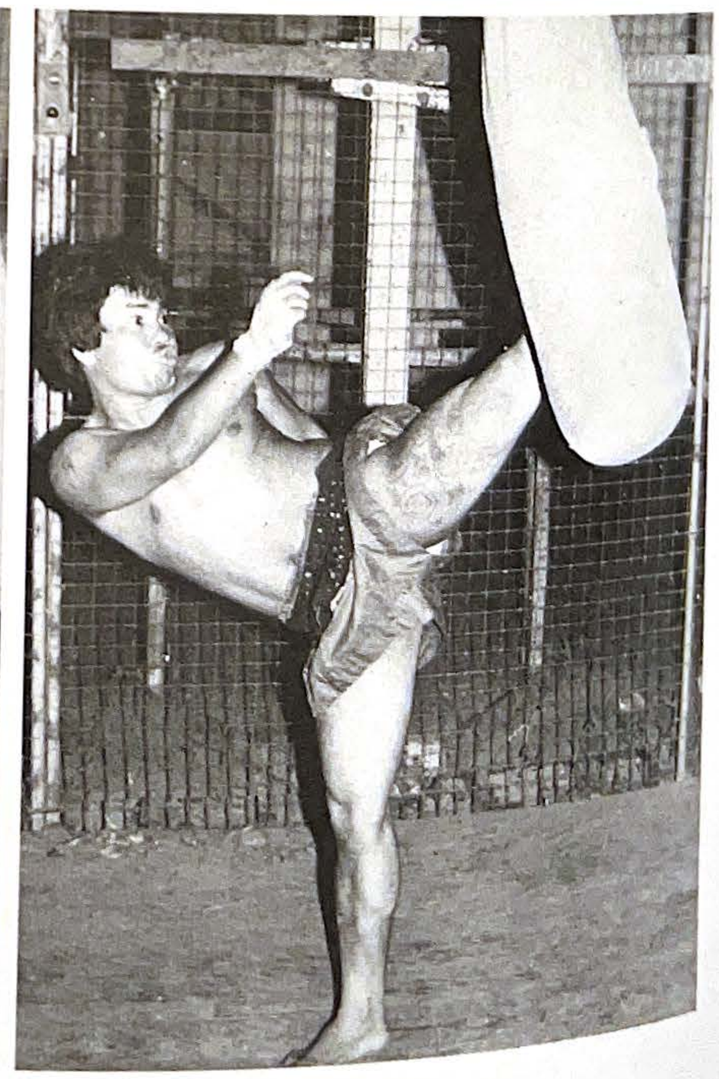




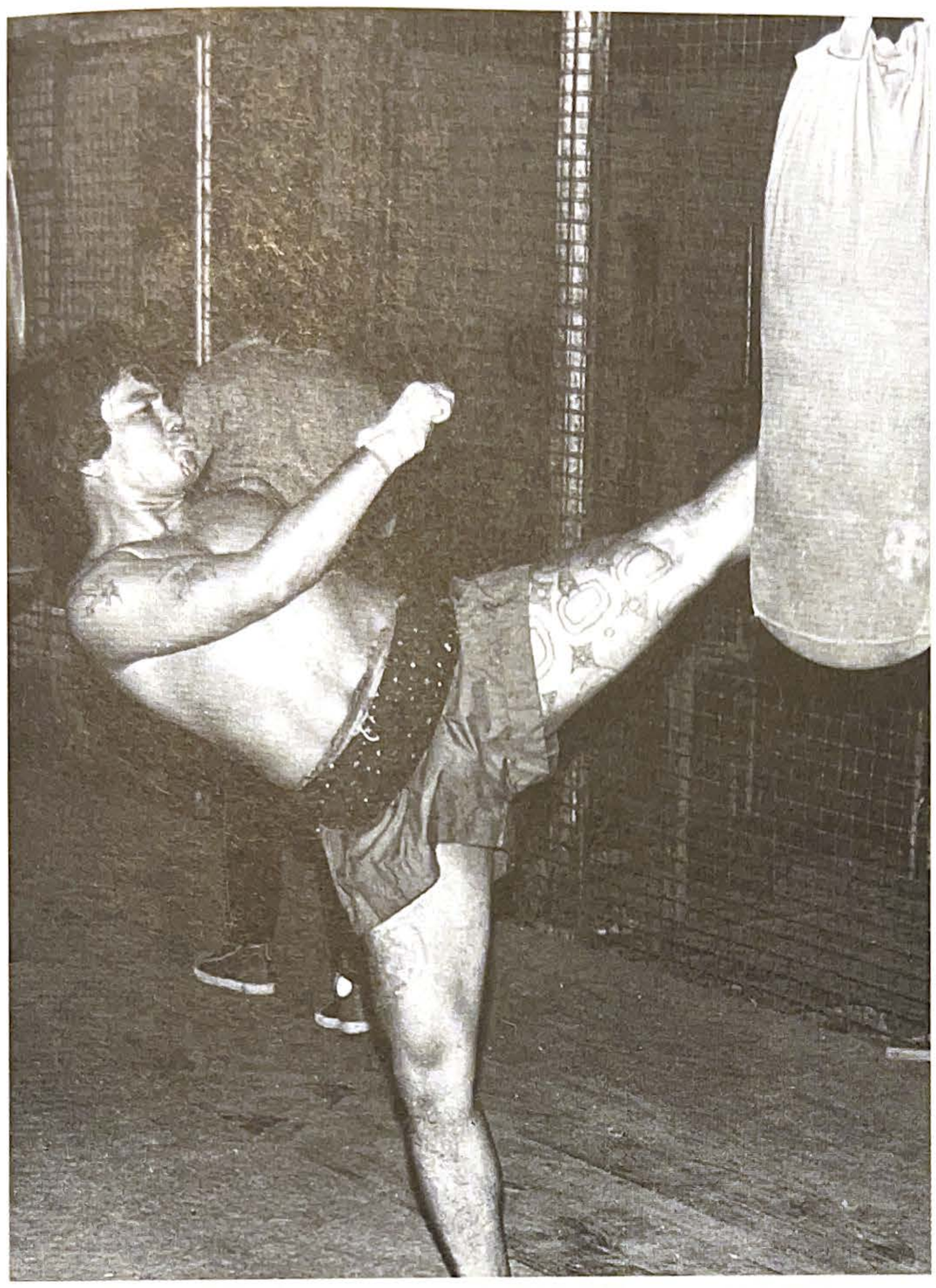
FIGURES 152 – 154: Start with a front thrust and a round kick and finish the combination with a semicircular elbow strike.
(By the way, the elbow strike is a fantastic finishing techniques in the ring as well as the street. Notice that you
should always grab your opponent before an elbow strike because of its short range.)

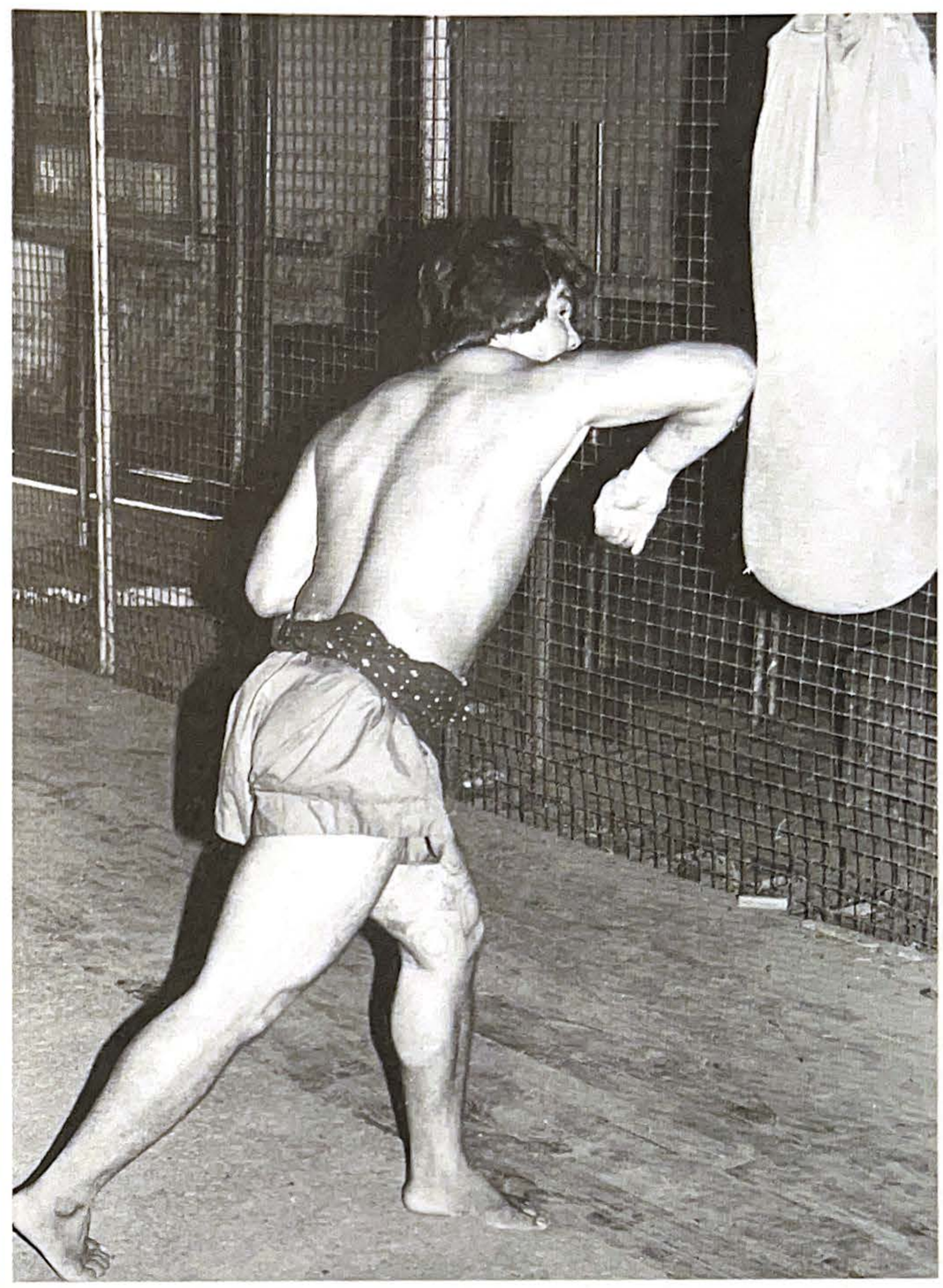
FIGURE 155: Spend a great deal of time practicing kneeing. You can harden your knees only by extensive practice at each training session. There is no other way to master this close-range fighting technique.





FIGURES 156 – 158: The front kick is an excellent starting technique. Follow up with the knee and round kick. Wait for the bag to swing back and at the right moment start another combination. Be careful not to miss the bag—especially while executing the front thrust—because this could lead to a knee injury.





FIGURES 159 AND 160: Simple combinations are often the best. Here a fighter starts with a left middle round kick and finishes with a right elbow smash.

Sanskrit word "swasti," which means health or good fortune.

Mental Attitude

There are many branches of the martial arts, but the approach to the fight is always the same. This chapter goes beyond traditional Burmese boxing to discuss points in common to all martial arts. I'm sure that you have reached the conclusion on your own that strength or technique, no matter how important they may be, are not the decisive factors in the outcome of a fight.

How can you prepare yourself mentally for a fight and how must you start? What attitude should you take? Should you relax with a breathing exercise or start with concentration? Probably none of these alternatives can help you prepare yourself completely for the forthcoming fight.

In my opinion you must reach self-confidence first by deciding two important questions: are you willing to participate in matches and, if so, under which rules? If you train for self-defense, you must also decide under which circumstances you will fight. Of course it is not wise to try anything against a man with a gun, or against several opponents, or simply because somebody said some vulgar words to you in a traffic jam. If you are not in real danger, simply ignore some minor discomforts and ignorance; if you are in real danger, you must decide to fight like a tiger.

To be really effective in self-defense, you need to train at least three times a week. You must accept too, that you will receive some injuries in the process; don't believe stories where opponents are knocked out without hitting back.

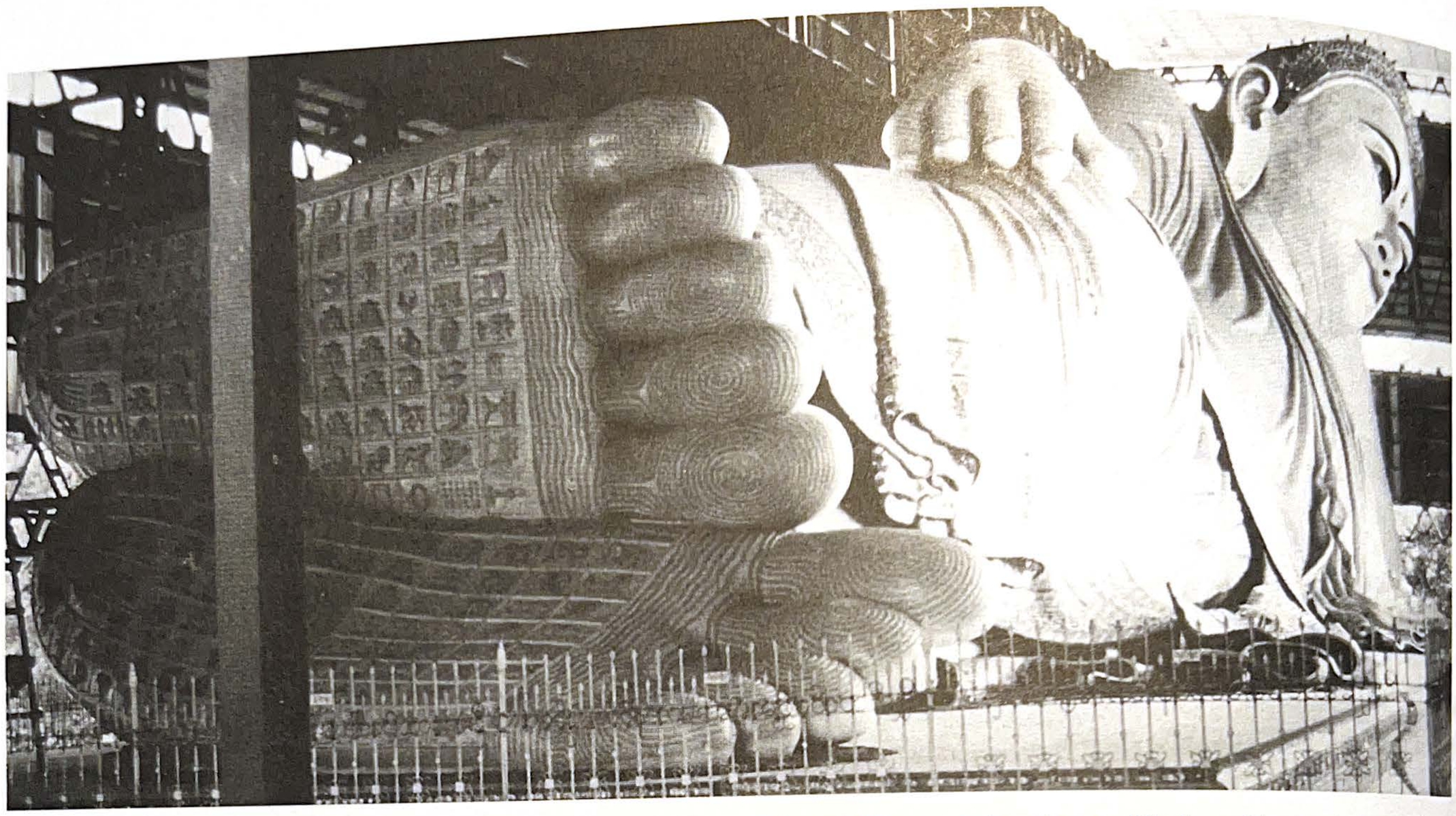


FIGURE 161: This is the Chauk Htat Gyi Pagoda in Rangoon. The reclining Buddha image here is one of the largest images in Burma.

If you are considering a sport career, you must focus on training and sparring every day. You must accept, too, that you will receive beatings sometimes, especially in the beginning of your career.

Try to find a qualified trainer; this is not an easy task, as there are many trainers who claim to be experts in martial arts but cannot teach. Find a trainer who is a good teacher and can be a good friend. After you reach a certain level, you can consider how far you want to continue, that is, if you have the skill or desire for a professional career.

Whatever your decision, you must work consistently on muscle relaxation. Try to get rid of bad habits such as tightness, tension, shortness of breath, and uncontrolled bursts of force, which can prevent you from doing your best. Actually you should be as relaxed as a cat—one of the most effective predators in nature. If you've ever closely watched a cat as it walks, stretches lazily, or responds to attack, you will see that relaxation is the first skill that you must master on your way to becoming a good fighter.

The relaxation of muscles can be exercised statically or dynamically. Relaxing the muscles group by group while lying down, starting from the toes and moving up to the neck muscles and the face, is one of the best static exercises. The muscles should be relaxed so that they become soft, and after a while your arms and legs will seem as heavy as lead. You may also have a sensation of floating, which is a sign that you have relaxed your muscles completely in the right way. If you learn how to relax in this way it will serve you well, because you will learn to avoid many stresses with which daily life is unfortunately so full.

The dynamic relaxation of the muscles requires learning to control the muscles so that you can use them selectively. For example, all muscles must be relaxed when moving except the necessary leg muscles and the muscles of the neck and back that hold you upright, though none of these muscle groups are entirely contracted. You should relax before and after delivering a blow or blocking; if you are not relaxed enough when executing your technique,

you will not be able to deliver with the maximum speed and explosiveness. Tightening and clenching the muscles after delivering a blow is a waste of energy. Furthermore, unnecessary muscle tension results in unnatural breathing, and quick exhaustion is only a step away from poor breathing control.

During a fight you should not be thinking about the possible outcome or injuries you might incur or inflict on your opponent, because fear and anxiety about what might happen are as dangerous as the opponent you are pitted against. It is better to call off the fight if you are worried or afraid.

Most every athlete feels a quickening of the pulse before an important match, along with a pulsation in the solar plexus or butterflies in the stomach. This is only excitement, which is normal and in most cases vanishes quickly—usually at the very beginning of the fight. But how can we reduce excitement to the least possible degree and eliminate fear?

It is not easy to answer this question, but perhaps it would be best to turn to a poem written by ancient Japanese fencing teacher Takuan (1573 – 1645):

Hell lies under the sword raised high
In front of which you quake,
Move forward
And the realm of bliss shall be yours.

In any case, you must work up your courage with positive thoughts and accept the negative thoughts as a challenge against which you should fight. You may cultivate the necessary self-reliance and the "winner's instinct" by doing so. Here is an example from more recent times.

Jack Dempsey, the American professional boxing champion who was often quite nervous before a fight, used to spark his own courage with these thoughts: "Nothing will stop me from winning; the opponent is not going to get the best of me. I'll last to the end no matter what happens."

Chuck Norris, world-renowned champion of open karate tournaments in the United States, spent days before matches imagining how he would fight against his opponents, giving and blocking punches and winning at the end.

The value of positive thinking and the imagination is undoubtedly great, but it takes a while to reap the benefits. In any case, quite a bit of energy must be invested and you mustn't give up too soon. If you learn to use positive thinking, you can apply it to all aspects of everyday life and you can be sure that results will follow. (But remember that the opposite is

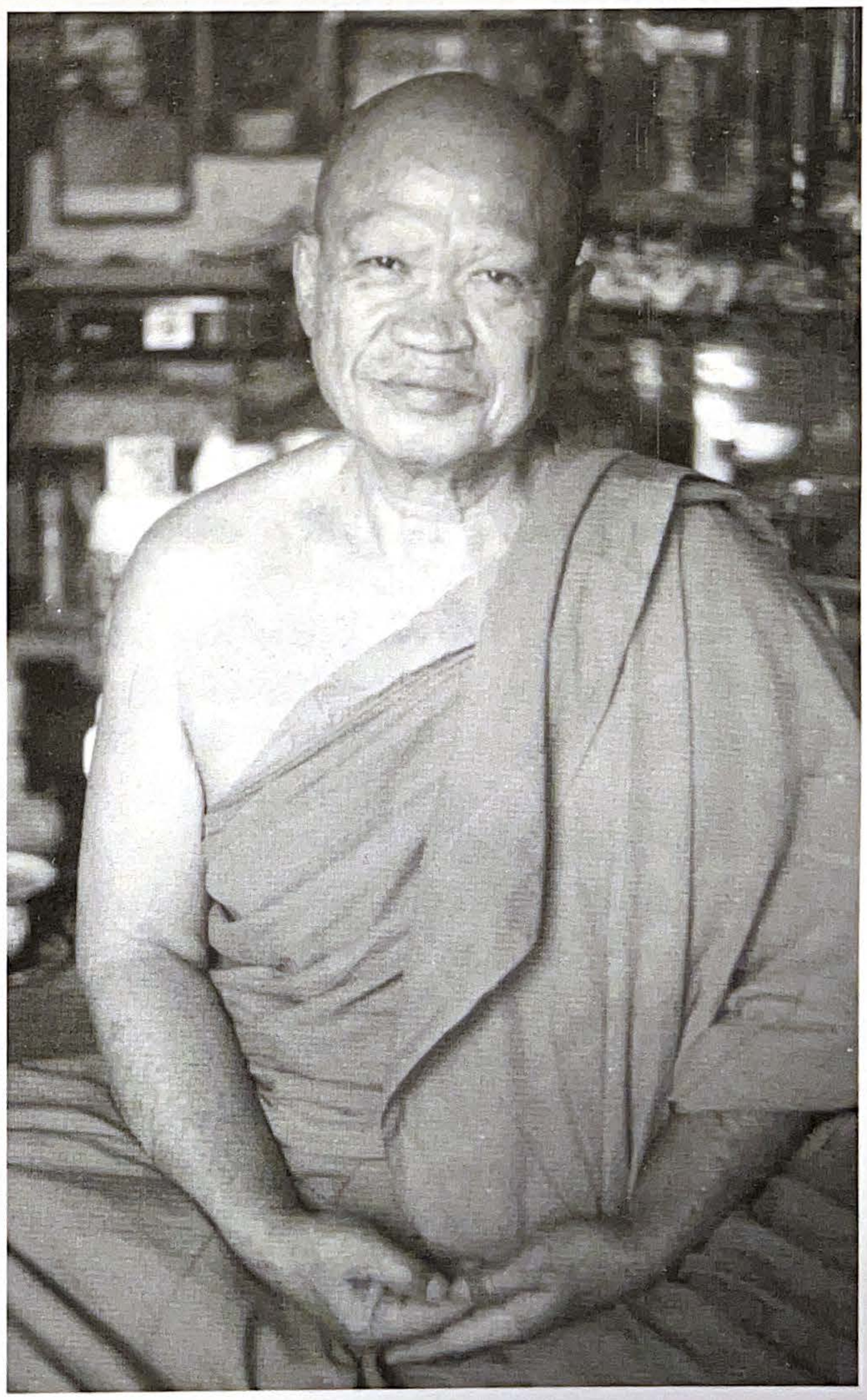


FIGURE 162: A Buddhist priest is shown in the vipassana position.

true as well—negative thinking can often condemn you to a negative outcome.)

Aside from all of this, it is useful for the stability and balance of the spirit to practice various breathing and concentration exercises. The word exercise here is used in a specific sense; they begin only as exercises but later they become a part of your everyday life. You may use yoga breathing techniques or other practically oriented philosophical systems, but I would like to direct your attention to the Burmese *vipassana* method, founded by Buddhist priest Mahasi Sayadaw. This method has been popular for the past 25 years and a lot of related literature can be found.This method is based on concentrating on the process of breathing, during which you gradually eliminate all thoughts from the mind. The exercise is similar to that practiced by the pupils of Zen in Japan. You must take a comfortable position with your legs crossed and back upright, and then concentrate on breathing. At first it is useful to count the length of the breaths in and out, that must be equal in length, and later the attention must be focused on the tip of the nose or the diaphragm. The transitions from breath in to breath out and vice versa must be smooth. Exercises should last about 10 minutes to half an hour. You can judge the effects of this exercise through your own experience with it.

Returning to fighting and mental attitude, when the fight comes all thought processes must be pushed aside and your proficiency in the techniques must be transformed into the mastery of the fight. Somehow the pupil must acquire a new sense or feeling that will enable him to avoid blows and apply the appropriate techniques without thinking, unconsciously. We acquire knowledge in order to use it instinctively.

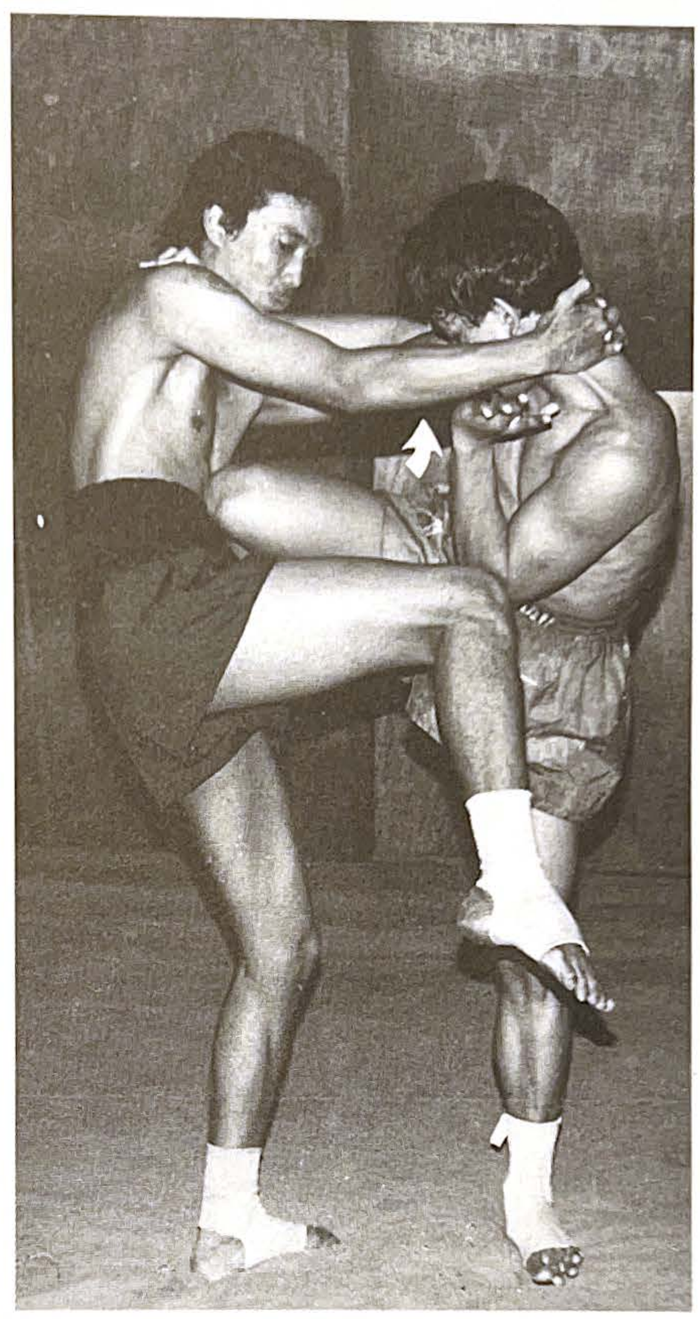
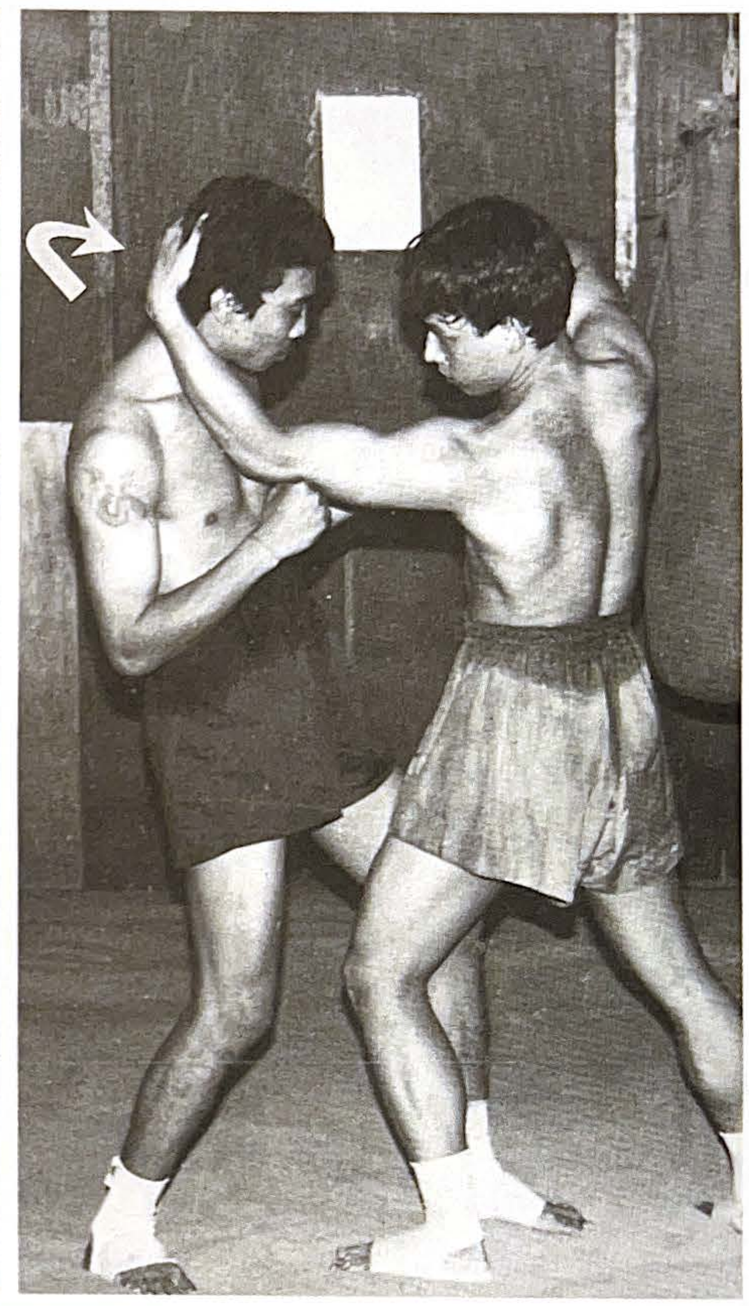
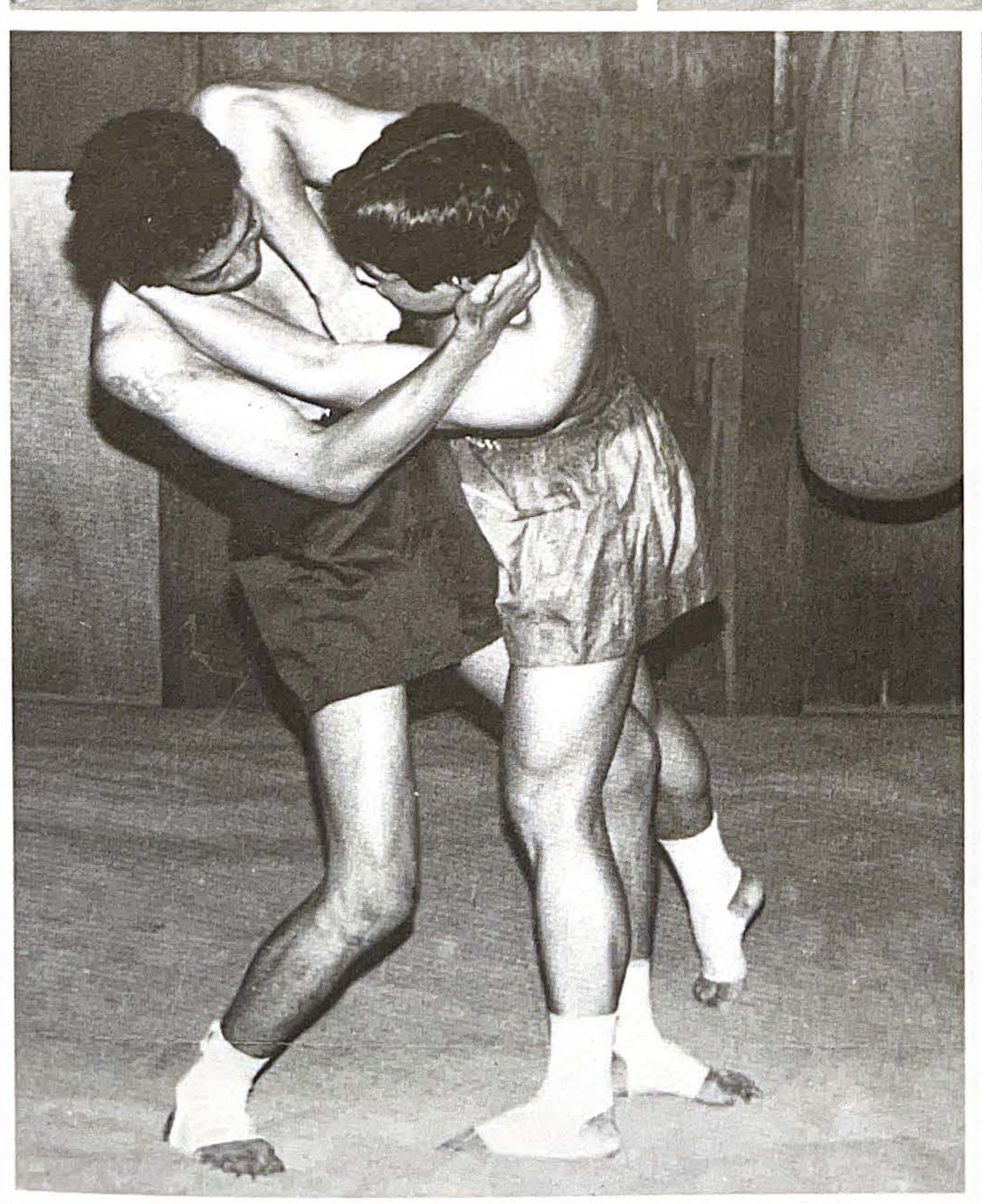
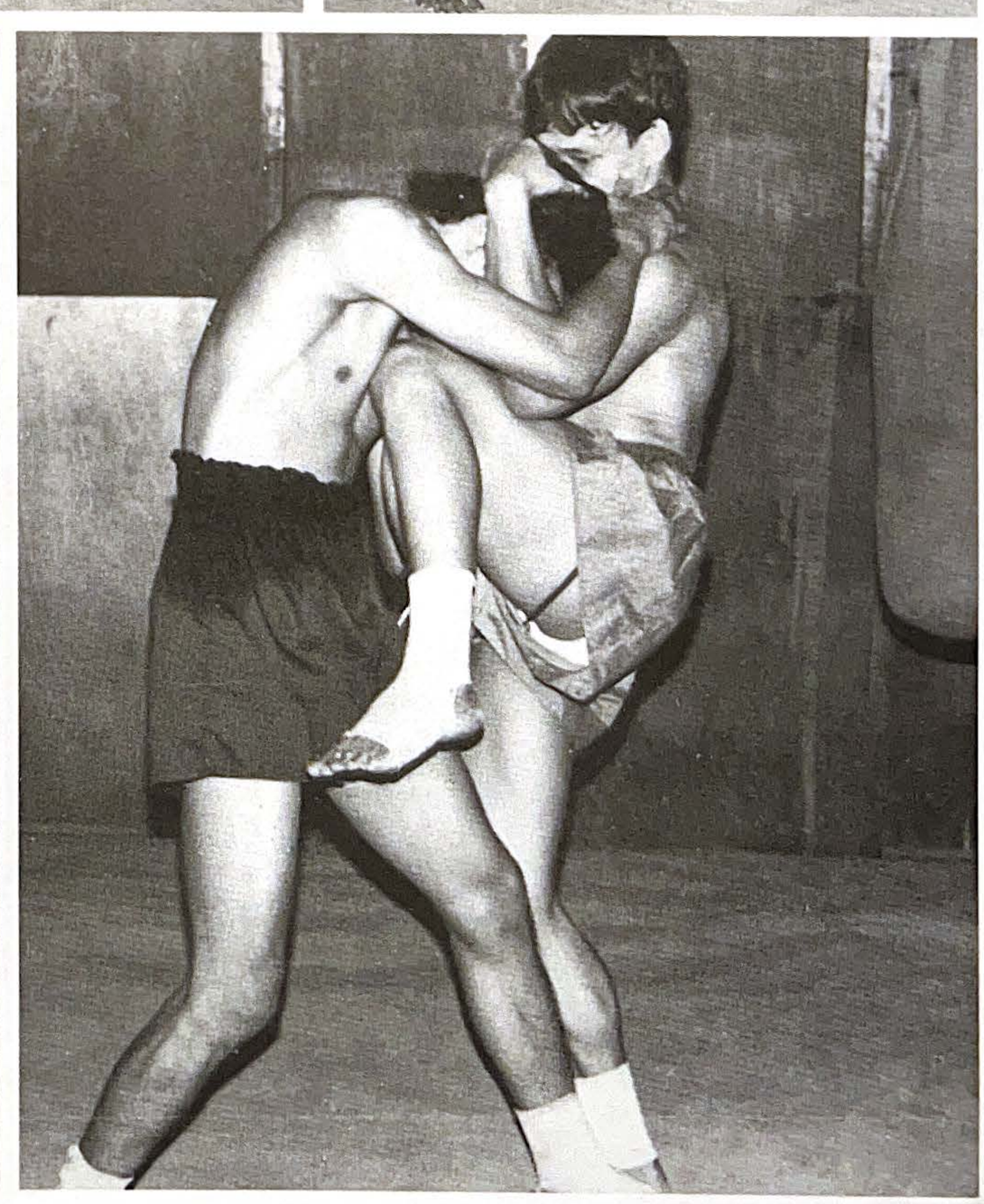
These last few sentences are hard to grasp at first, and harder yet to apply in real life. Any further explanation, in my opinion, would only make understanding of this material all the more difficult. But you should know that all great fighters, whether they use a sword or their bare hands, have managed in one way or another. Whether you are the winner or the loser in a match, experience is the most valuable thing you can win in the ring.

Ten Pointers for Training

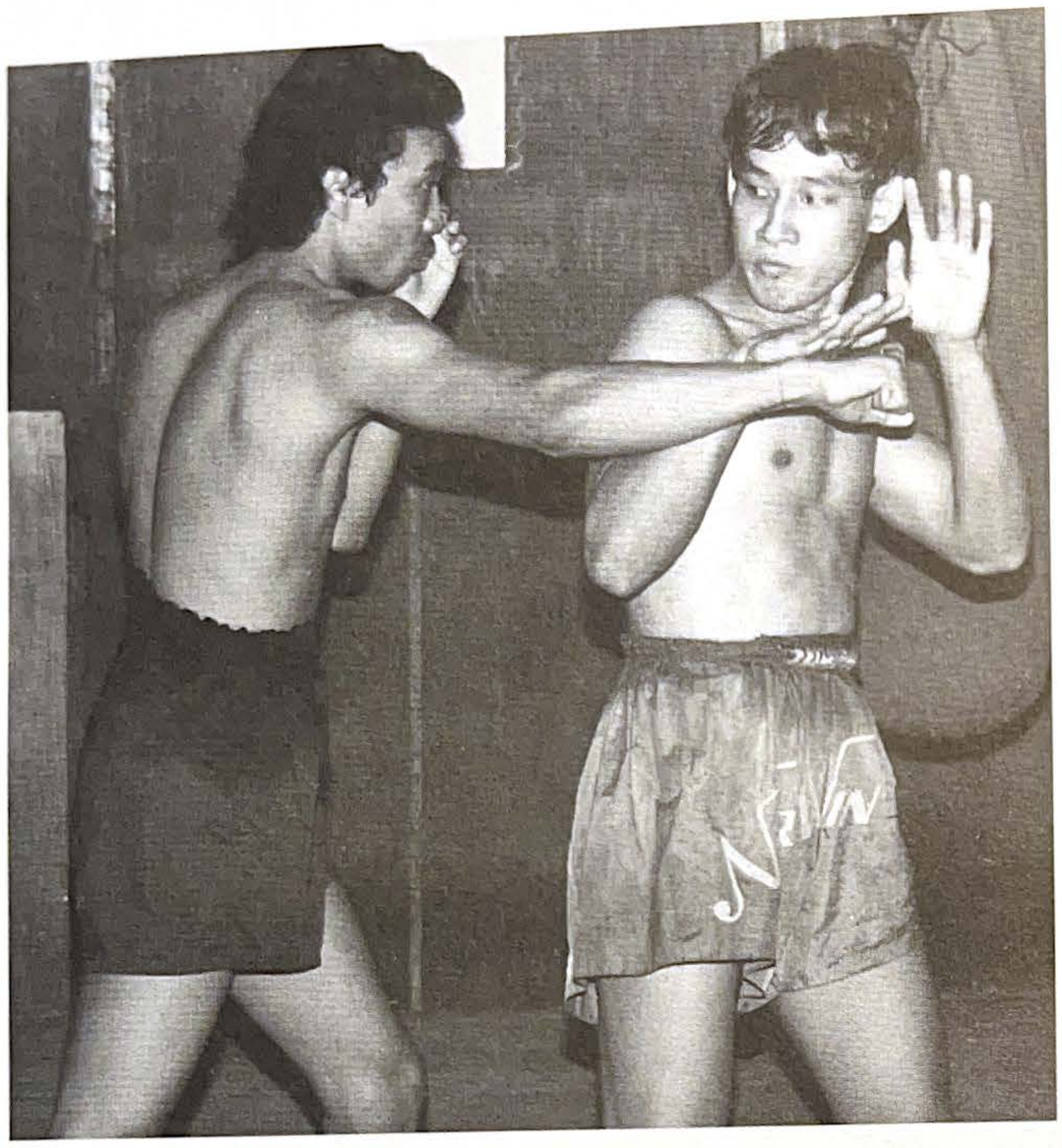
Before proceeding to the next chapter on attack and defense (the most interesting for the majority of the readers), look over this short list to help you identify mistakes that may occur during practice. You must be always honest with yourself and aware of your training habits.

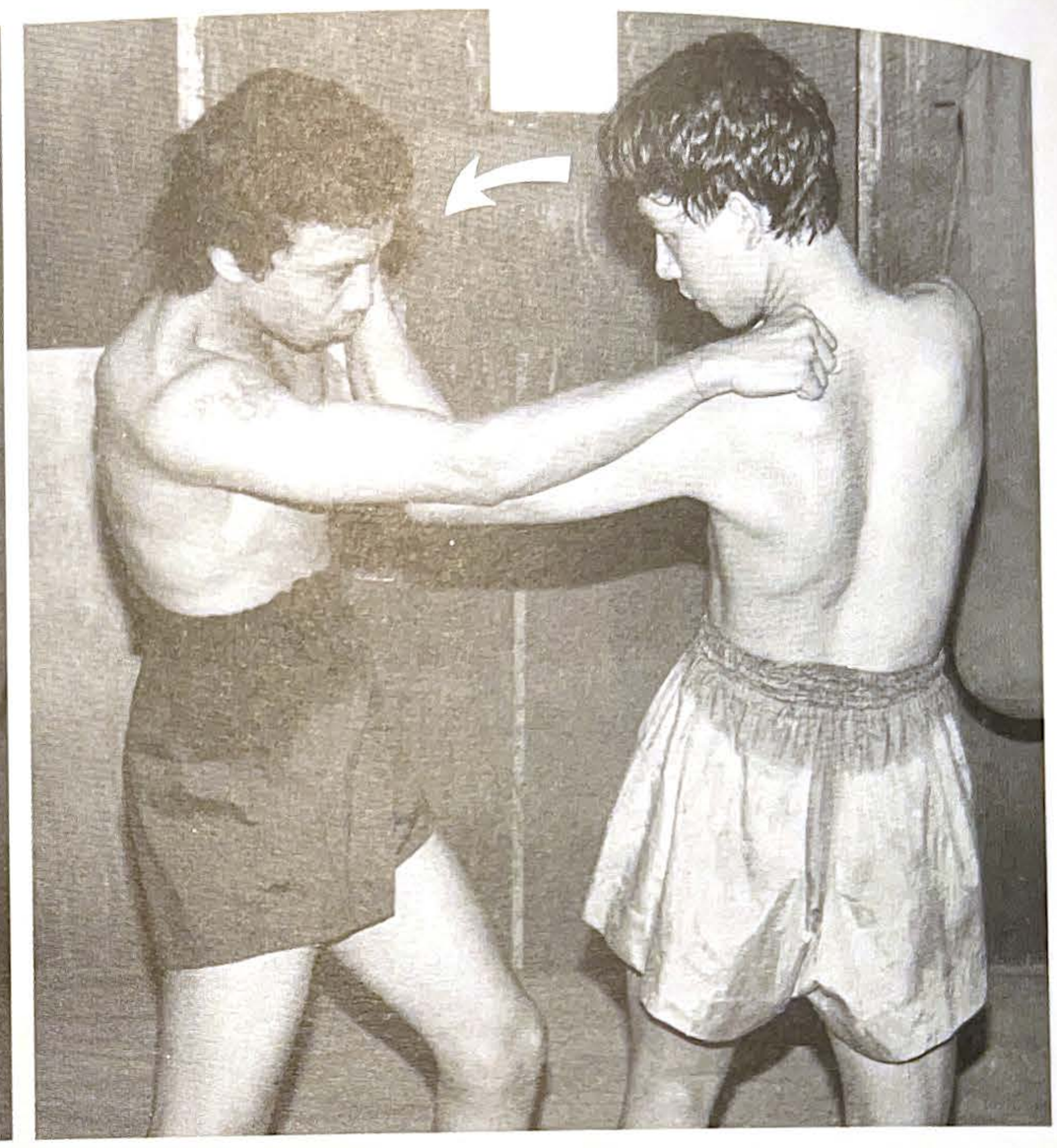
1. Do you always keep your arms high in the on-guard position?
2. During movements, are your legs slightly bent at the knees?
3. Do you walk on your toes, shifting the weight from one leg to another?
4. Are you relaxed during practice?
5. Do you exhale when delivering a blow?
6. Do you rotate your body and hips toward the blow?
7. Do you perform the techniques without too much effort?
8. Is the opponent's figure fully in your range of vision?
9. Is your mind calm but alert?
10. Are you ready to take some pain and minor injuries?

If you answer yes to each question, you are going in the right direction. Otherwise, you have bad habits to change.

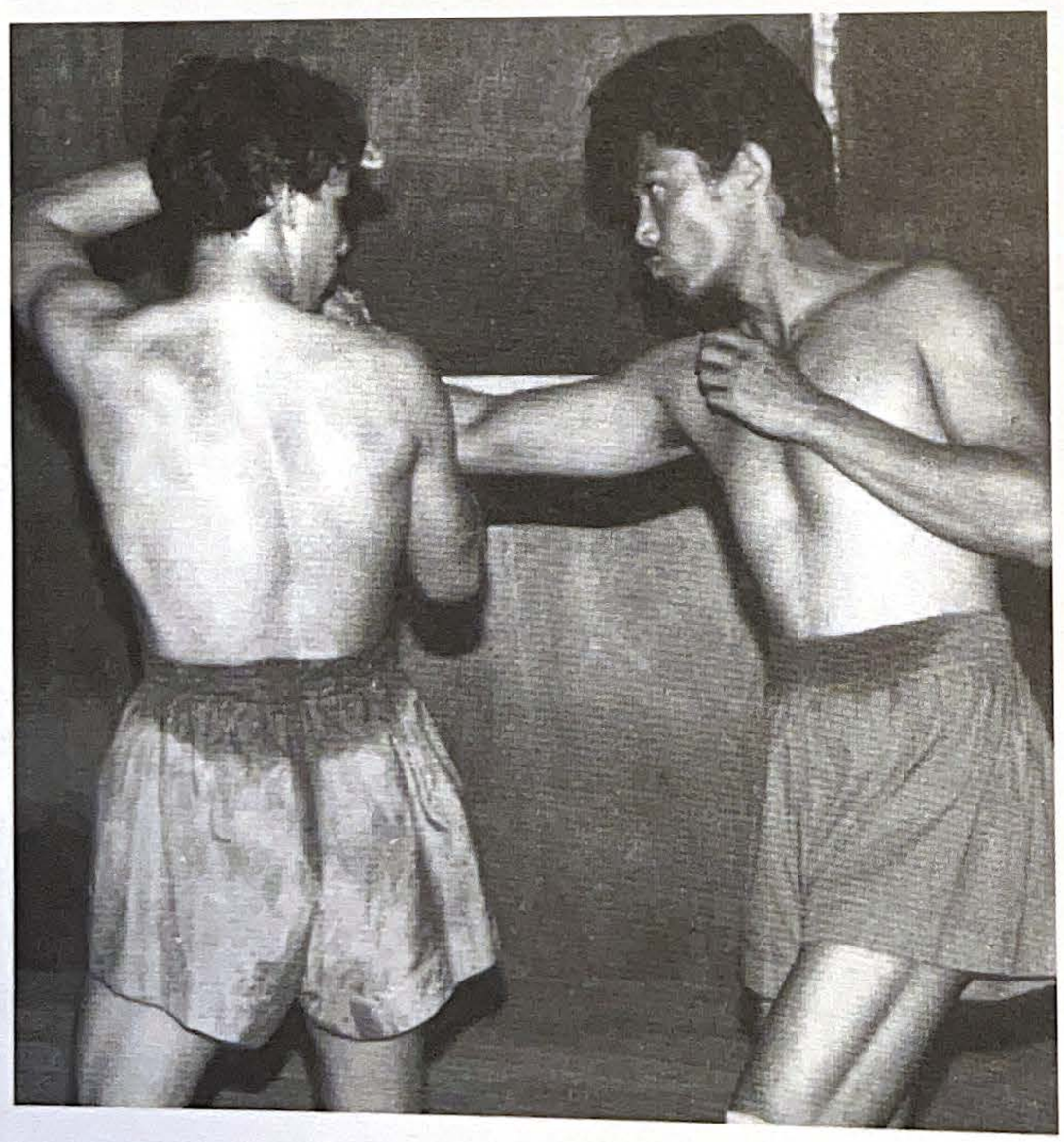





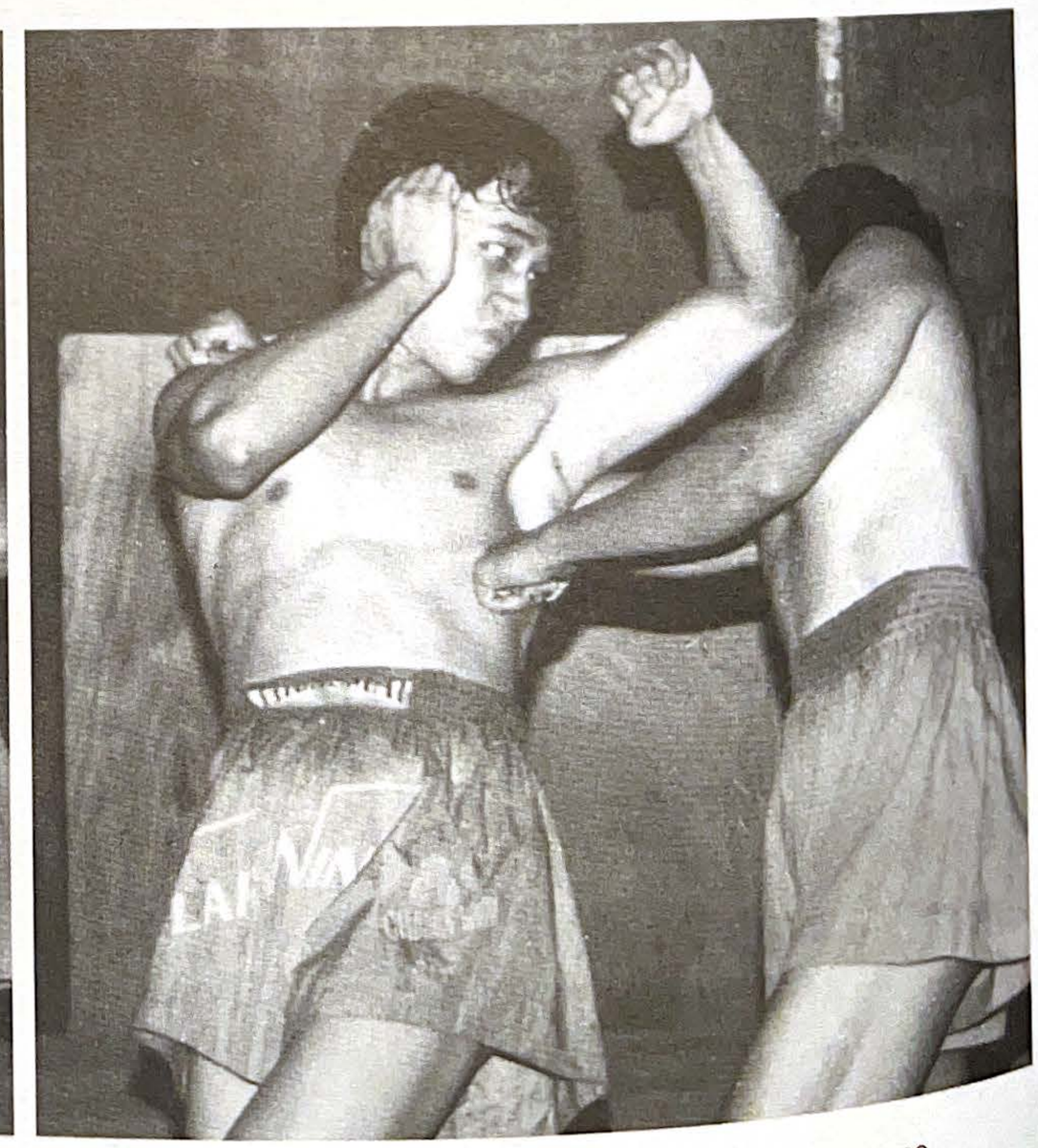
FIGURES 252 – 256: A successful defense depends a lot on your alertness—when you are grabbed, you must be aware that a knee will follow. Keep distance between yourself and your opponent with your right forearm so that he is not able to throw a knee with full power. Cover your ribs with your elbow or forearm. This block is sometimes painful, but it will give you a chance of survival. Immediately break his hold with an upward motion of your left hand and execute a right semicircular elbow strike, followed with a knee. You will need to practice this move often.





FIGURES 257 AND 258: Deflect a straight punch with your right forearm while simultaneously rotating your body and executing a circular back fist. The crucial point is to block softly and to start pivoting on your tiptoes simultaneously. Such defense is executed in one motion. You can generate enormous power by turning your body and hips into the back-fist blow. The Burmese are truly masters of such spin techniques and this popular defense is known as *ne pya ni vaida*. The primary target is your opponent's head.





FIGURES 259 AND 260: You can defend yourself against a straight punch following the same principles as the last sequence. But you must be little bit closer to execute a spinning back circular elbow strike. This technique is unique, the specialty of highly experienced Burmese and Thai boxers. If you achieve a high level of skill you can execute such a counter in a jumping motion. The Burmese refer to this technique as *d'tao hni payayda*. To be successful you must feel the rhythm of your opponent and execute strikes without any doubt or thinking about what would happen if you missed. You can use this counter in situations where your opponent is rushing powerfully forward and attacking with series of punches, but no blocks.

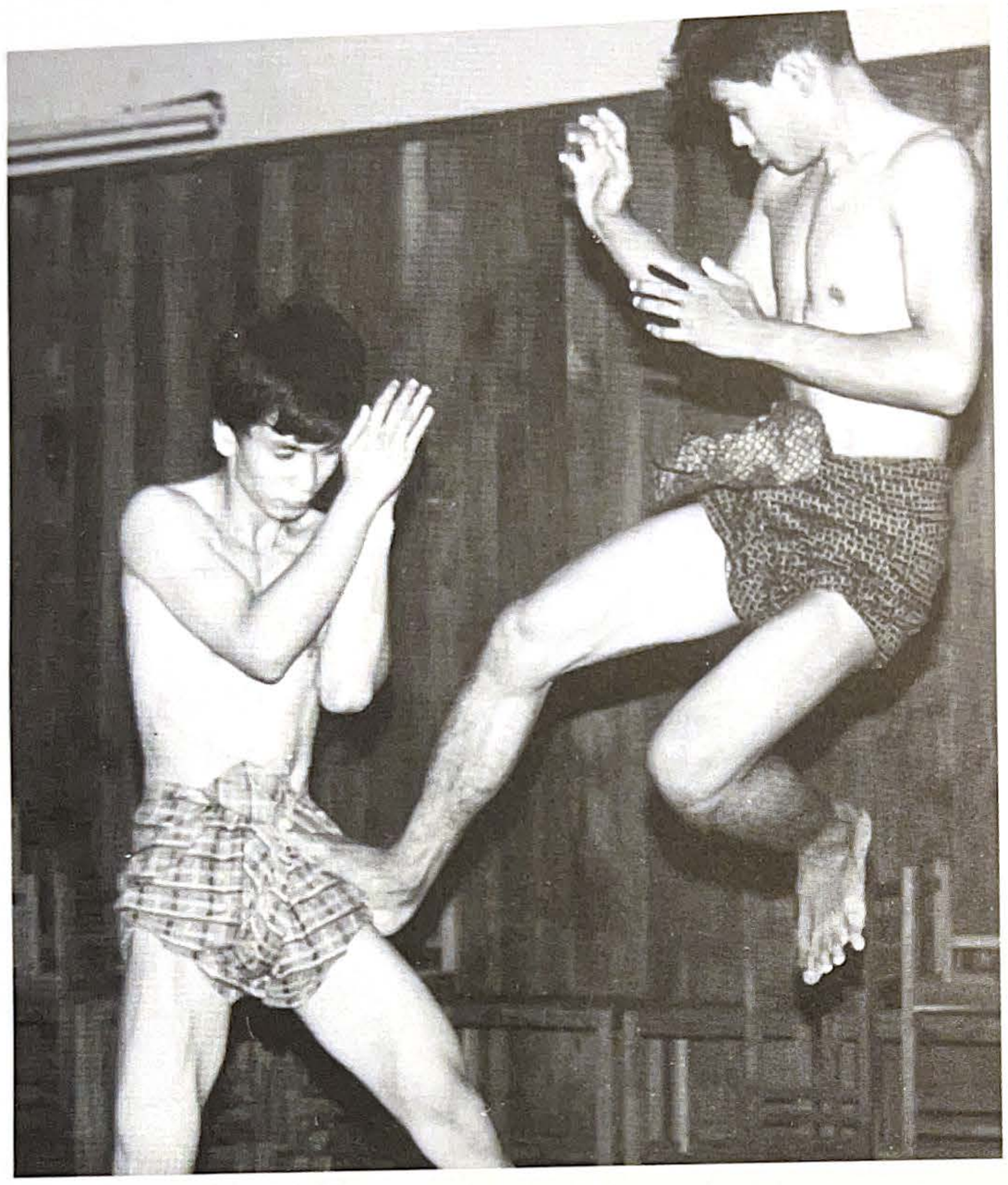
ANCIENT ARTISTIC TECHNIQUES

Every martial art has some techniques that can be described as ancient or traditional, or sometimes even artistic. These ancient methods deserve to be remembered, even though they often are not easy to perform and their self-defense application is sometimes questionable if you agree that simple defense is best one.

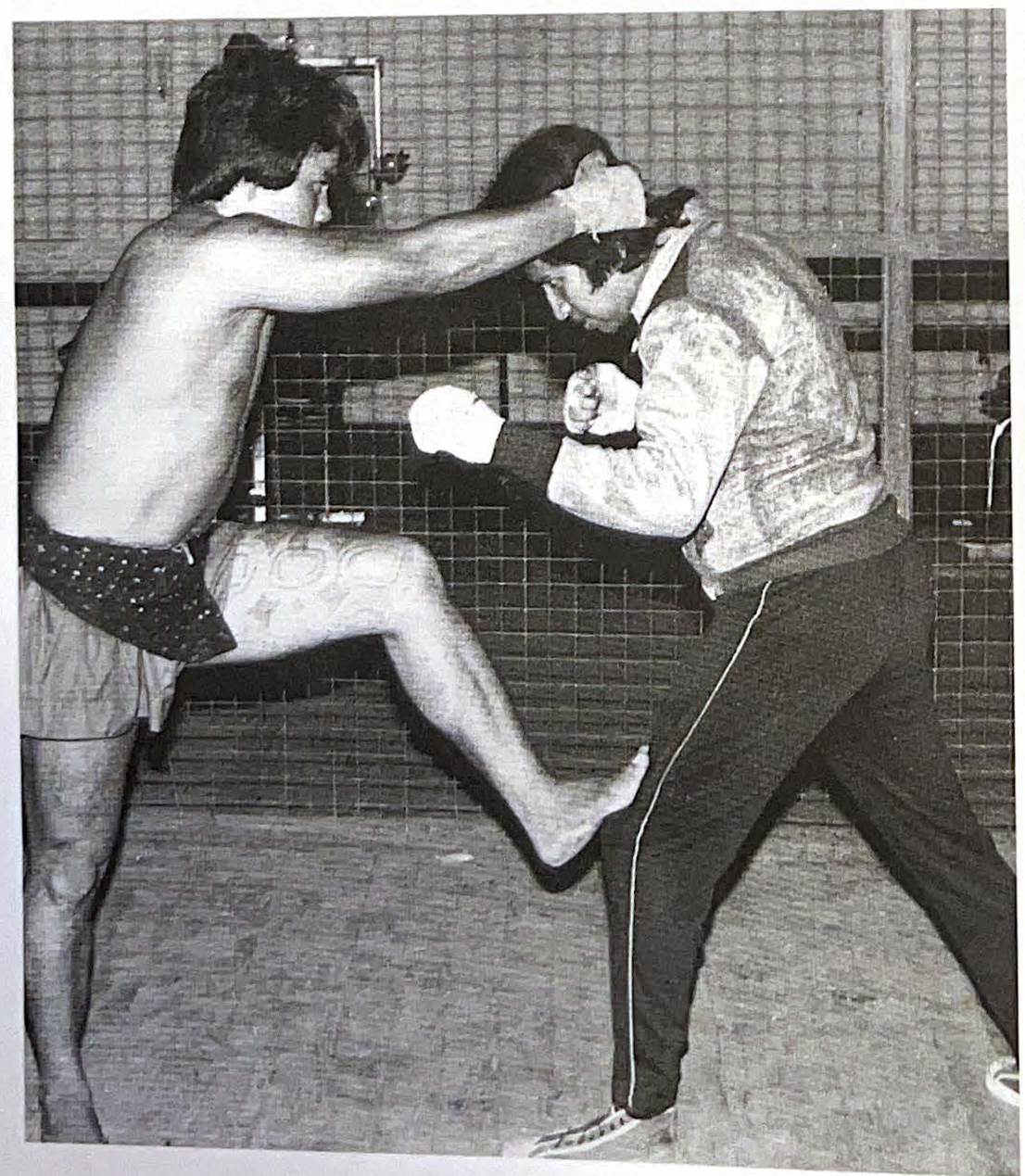
Some martial arts, such as kung fu, karate, aikido, and even taekwon do, have some traditional techniques incorporated in their training program, but they are usually reserved for advanced students. Here we'll look at some techniques from the early years of traditional Burmese boxing. They may be interesting to compare with other martial arts and by putting them in this book maybe they will not disappear.

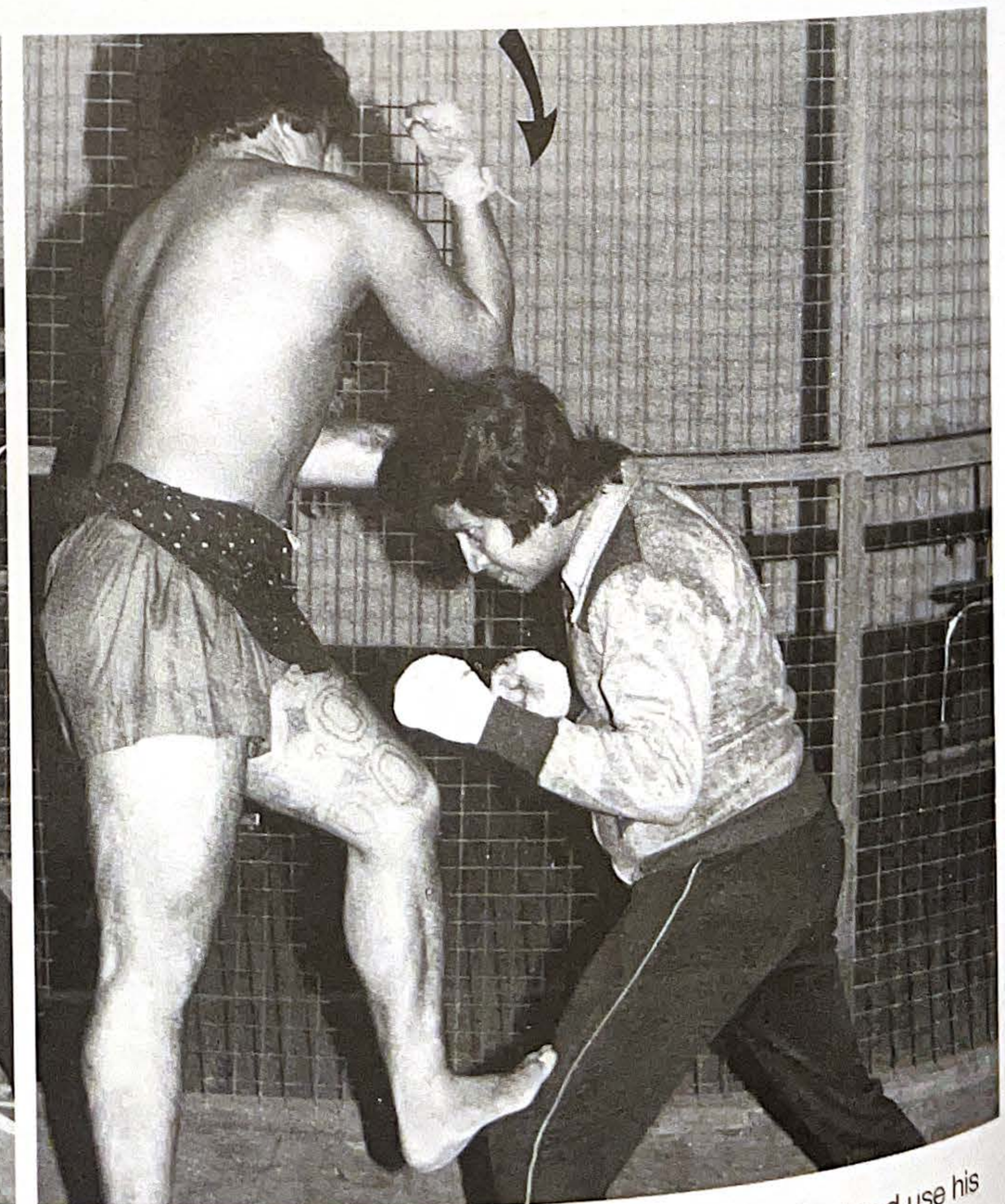
Avoid the usual beginner's mistake of trying to learn an advanced technique without mastering the basic ones. These techniques are rather difficult and shouldn't be attempted until you've already had years of training.

FIGURE 261: With a step or two for momentum, you can execute a flying double knee kick against your opponent. If you are a very skilled fighter you can even deliver one knee to the jaw and other knee to the midsection. The best fighters of all can land properly on both legs after delivering such a kick. Don't ask me how—you must try again and again with your own efforts and can't learn this technique from a book. If a fighter manages to end a match with this technique in Thailand and Burma, he is often given a special award by the organizers.

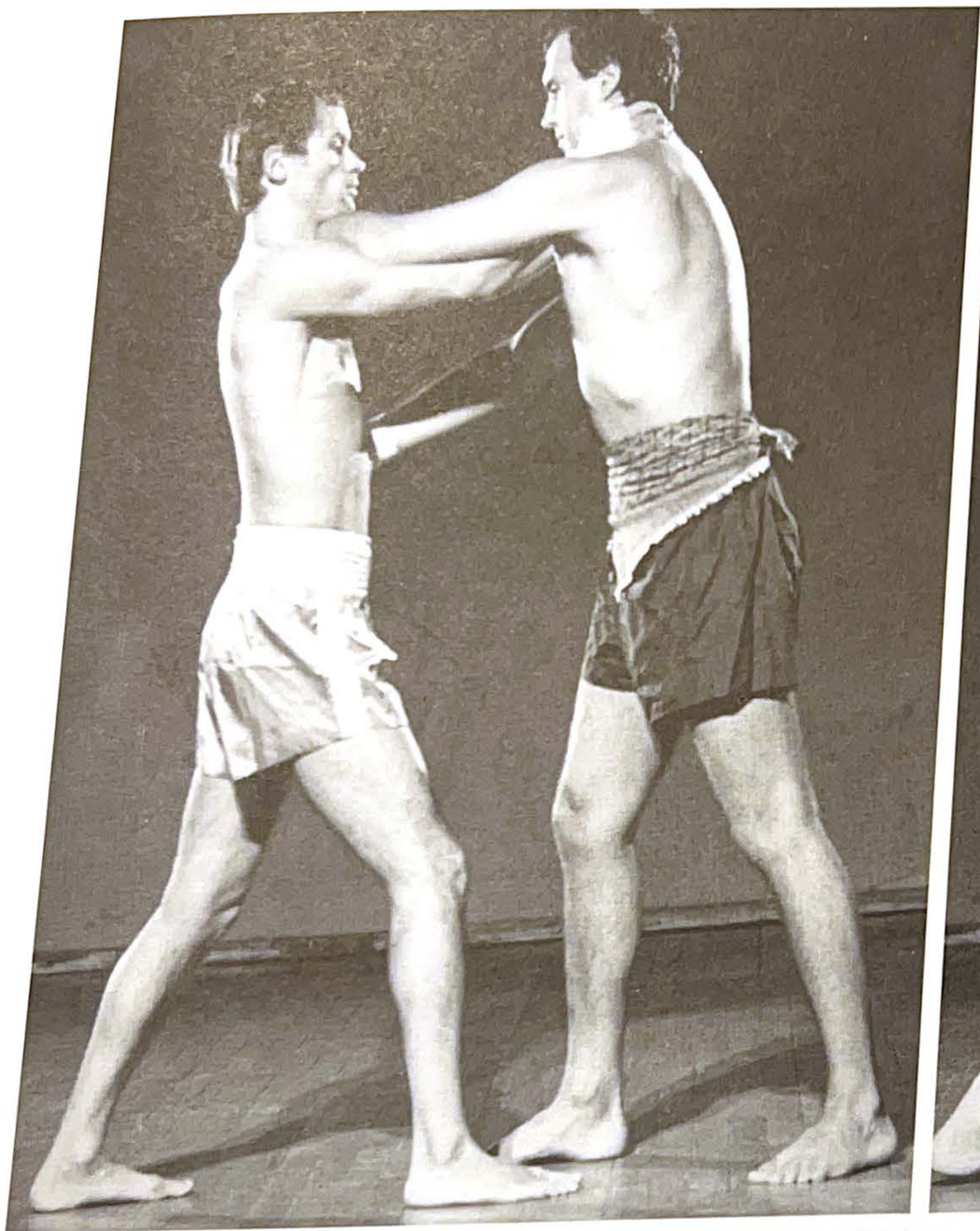


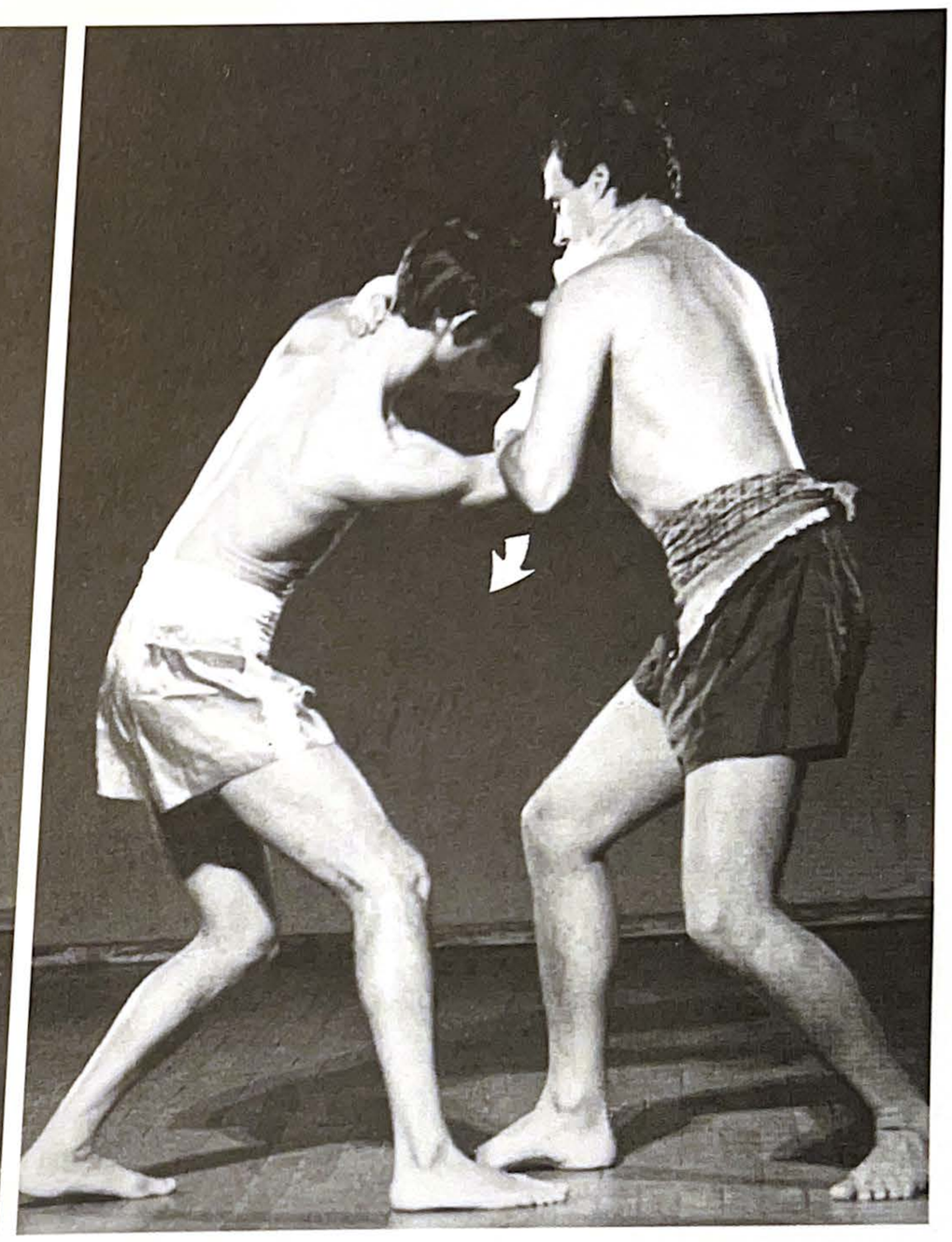
FIGURES 262 AND 263: In situations where there is enough space for momentum, you can execute a round kick by climbing on your opponent's thigh. You must be a quick jumper and choose the right moment when your opponent is confused or his concentration is broken. Don't put all your weight on the opponent's thigh, but instead jump toward him and use his leg as partial support.

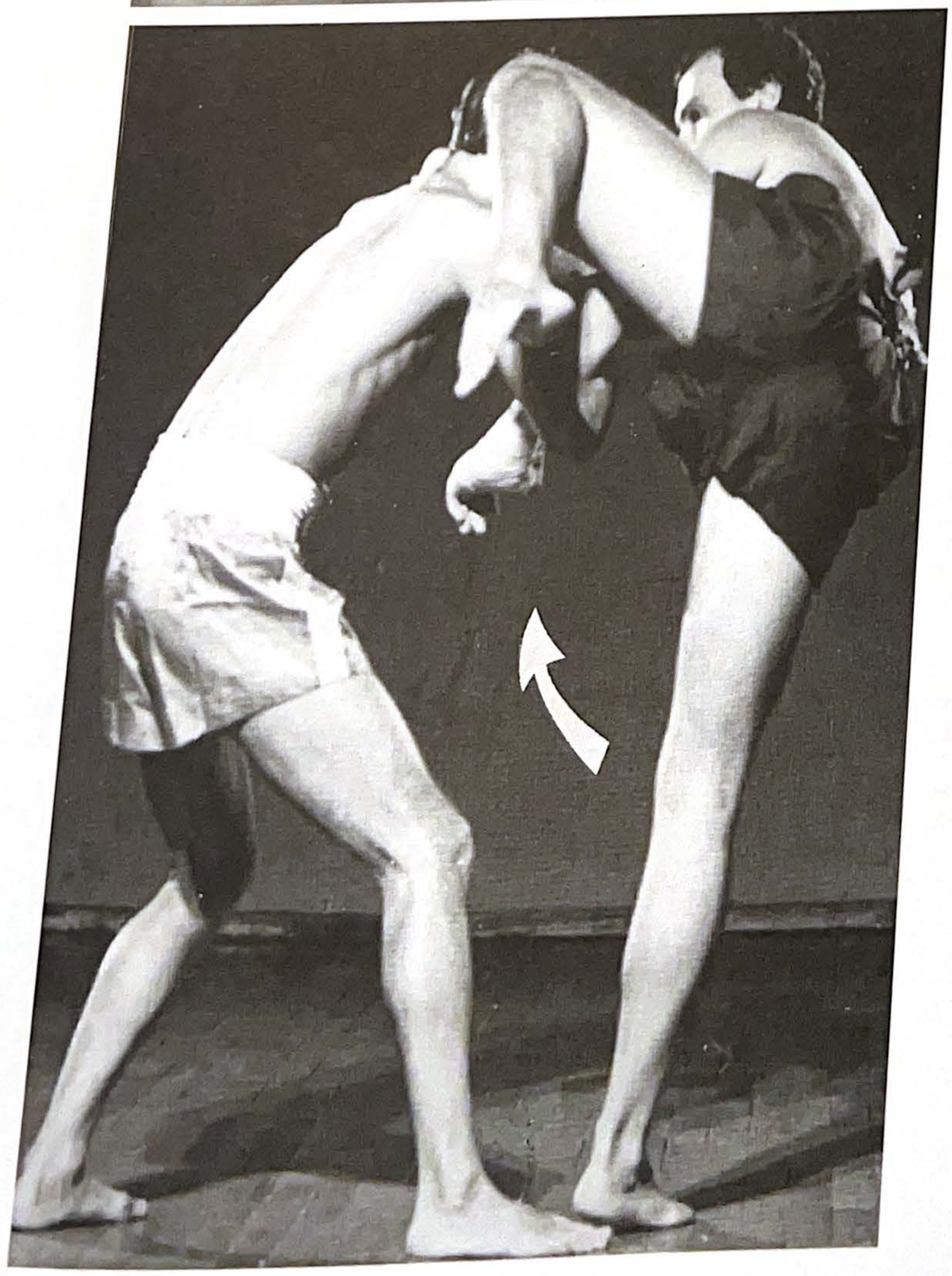




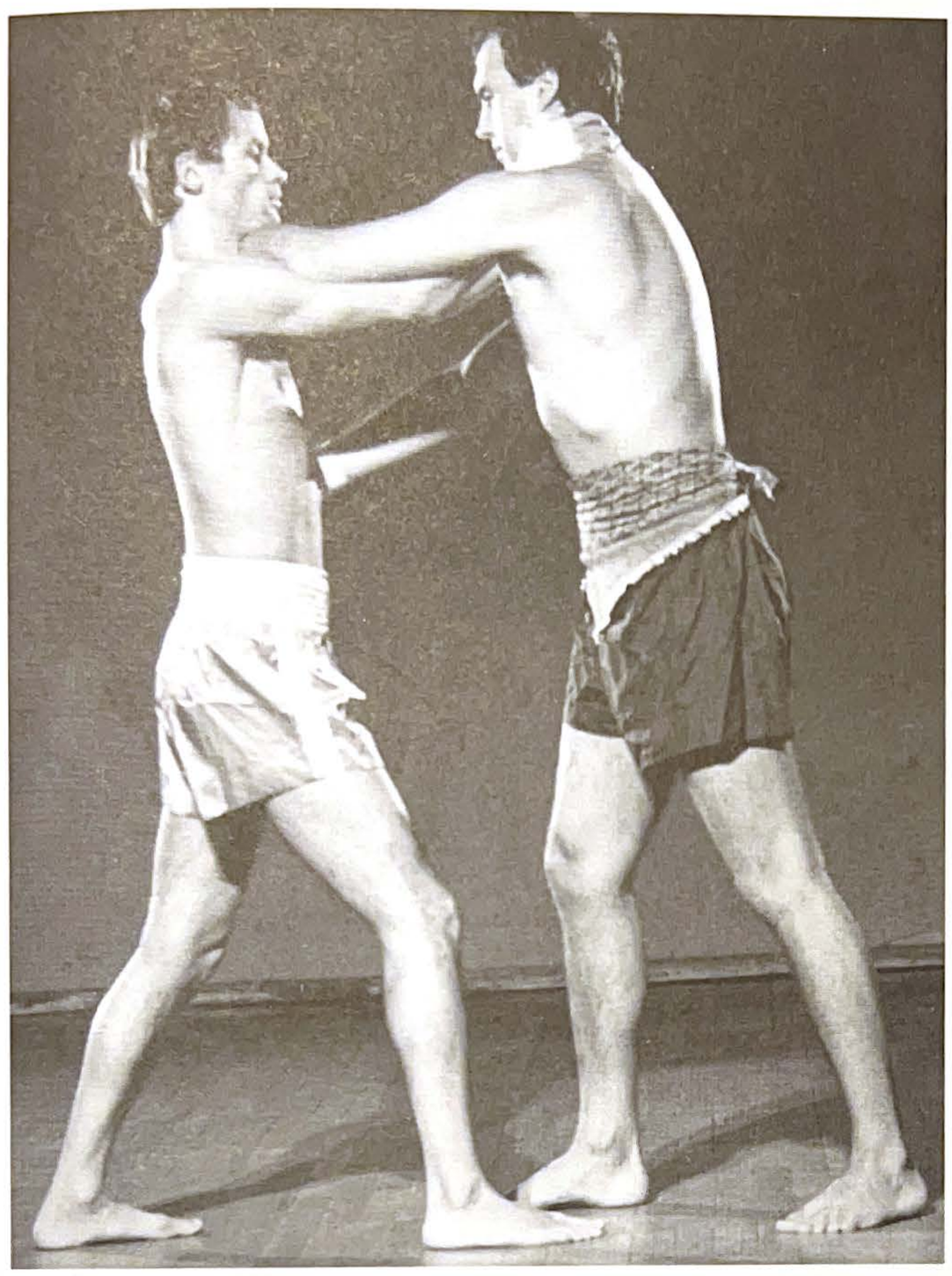
FIGURES 264 AND 265: Following the same principle you can execute a downward elbow strike. Jump toward your opponent and use his upper knee as a light support while simultaneously grabbing his neck and delivering a downward elbow smash. This technique is a more realistic one. You might use this technique as a finishing attack when your opponent is jolted or confused.

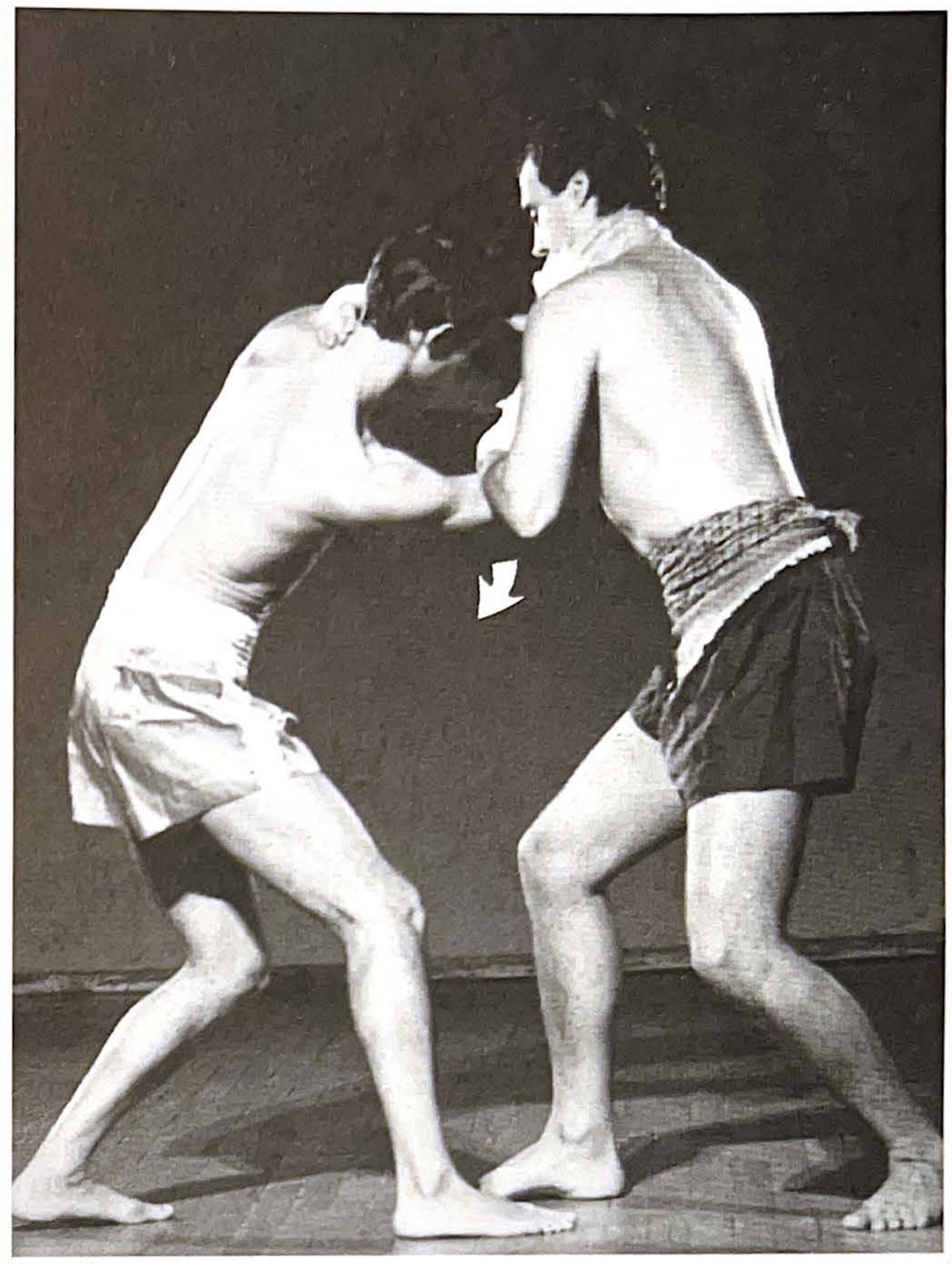


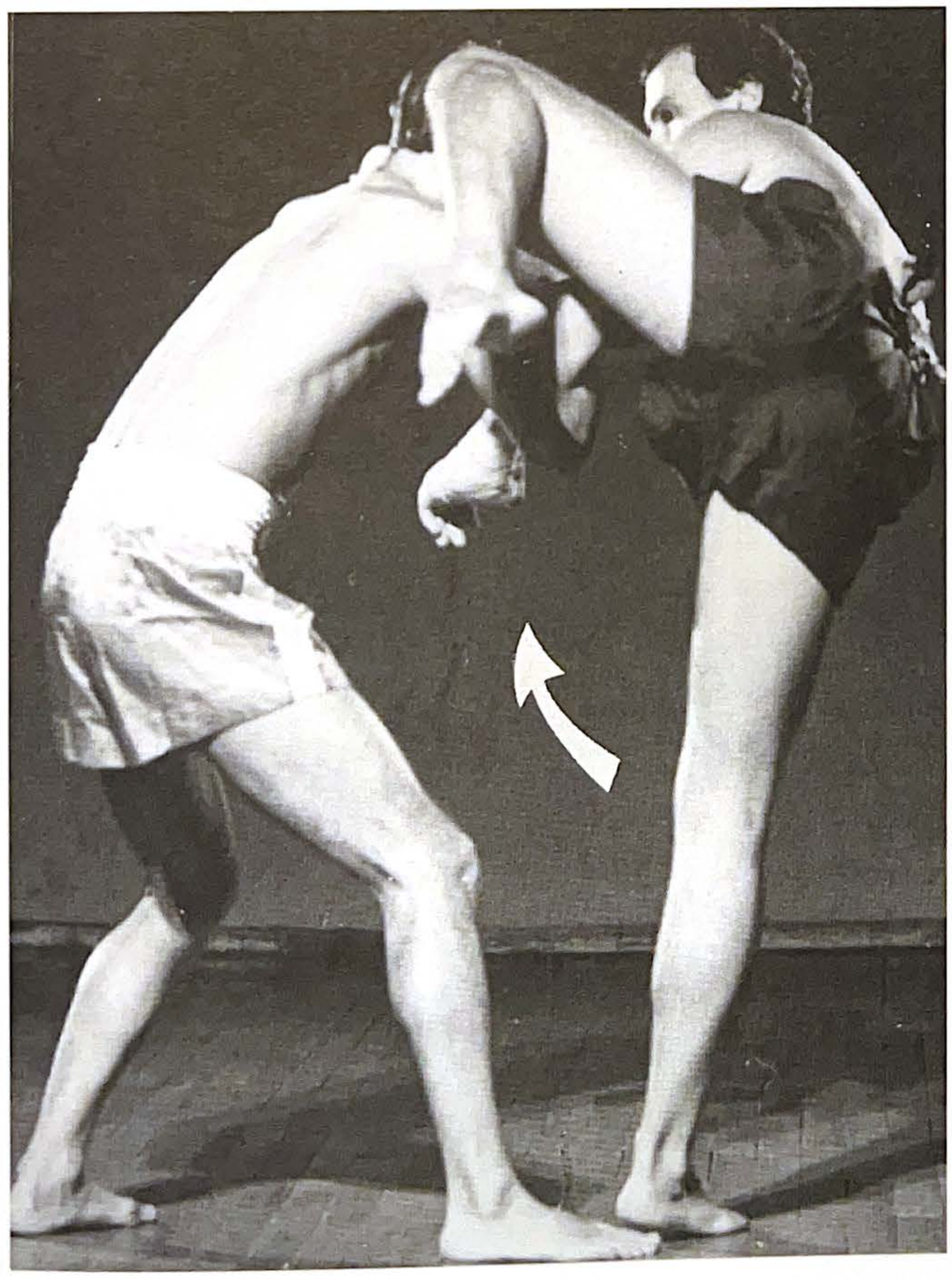




FIGURES 266 – 268: The over-arm knee kick is known in Burmese as well as in Thai boxing (under the name the king tiger technique). The fighter's leg moves toward his opponent's head along a semicircular route and his body bends to the side, almost horizontal but not too far from his opponent. It is important to neutralize the opponent's arm so he cannot push you away or block the kick. Be aware that if your strike misses your opponent, you will be thrown off balance. You will need to prepare for this move by doing lots of stretching exercises.







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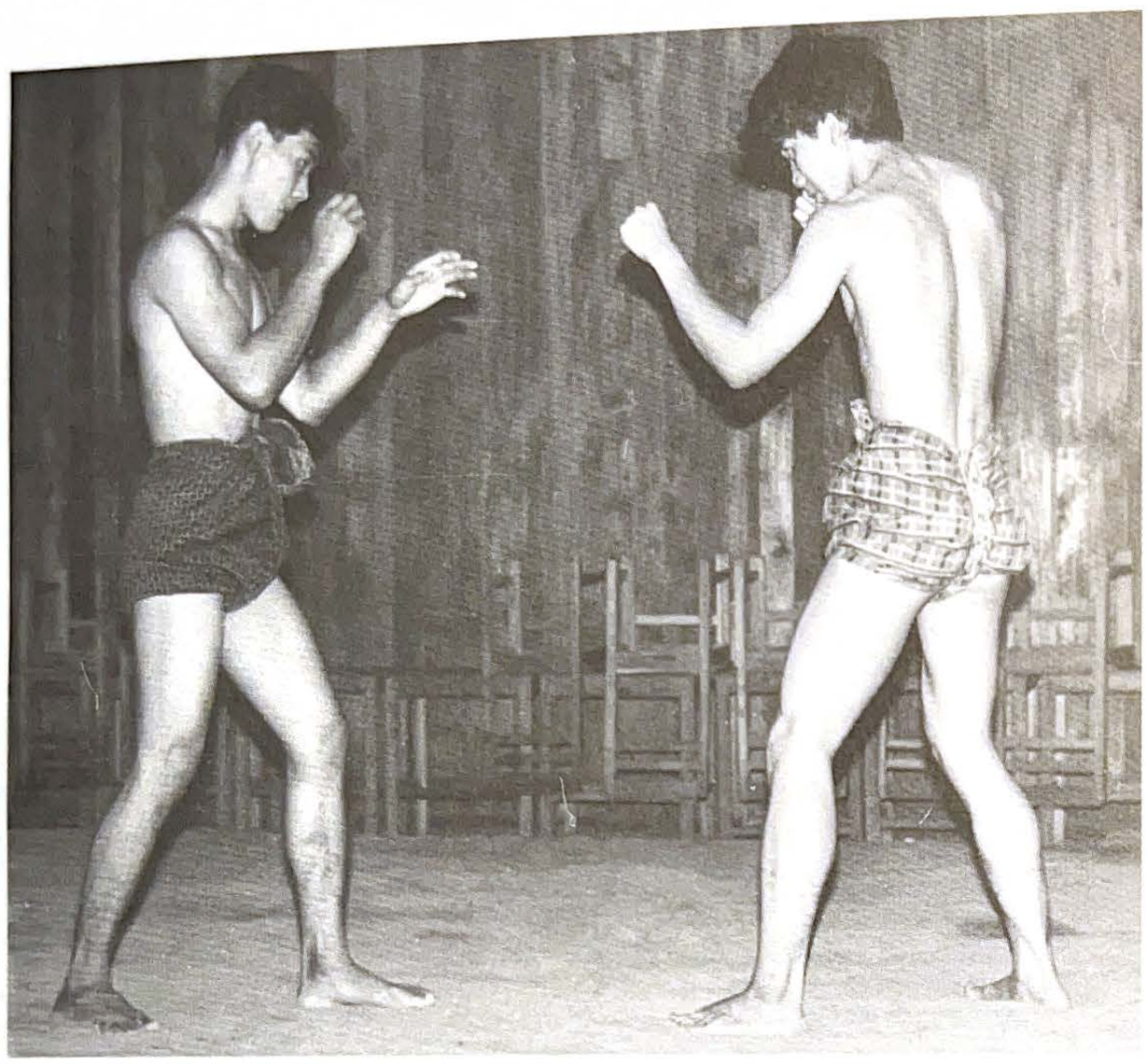
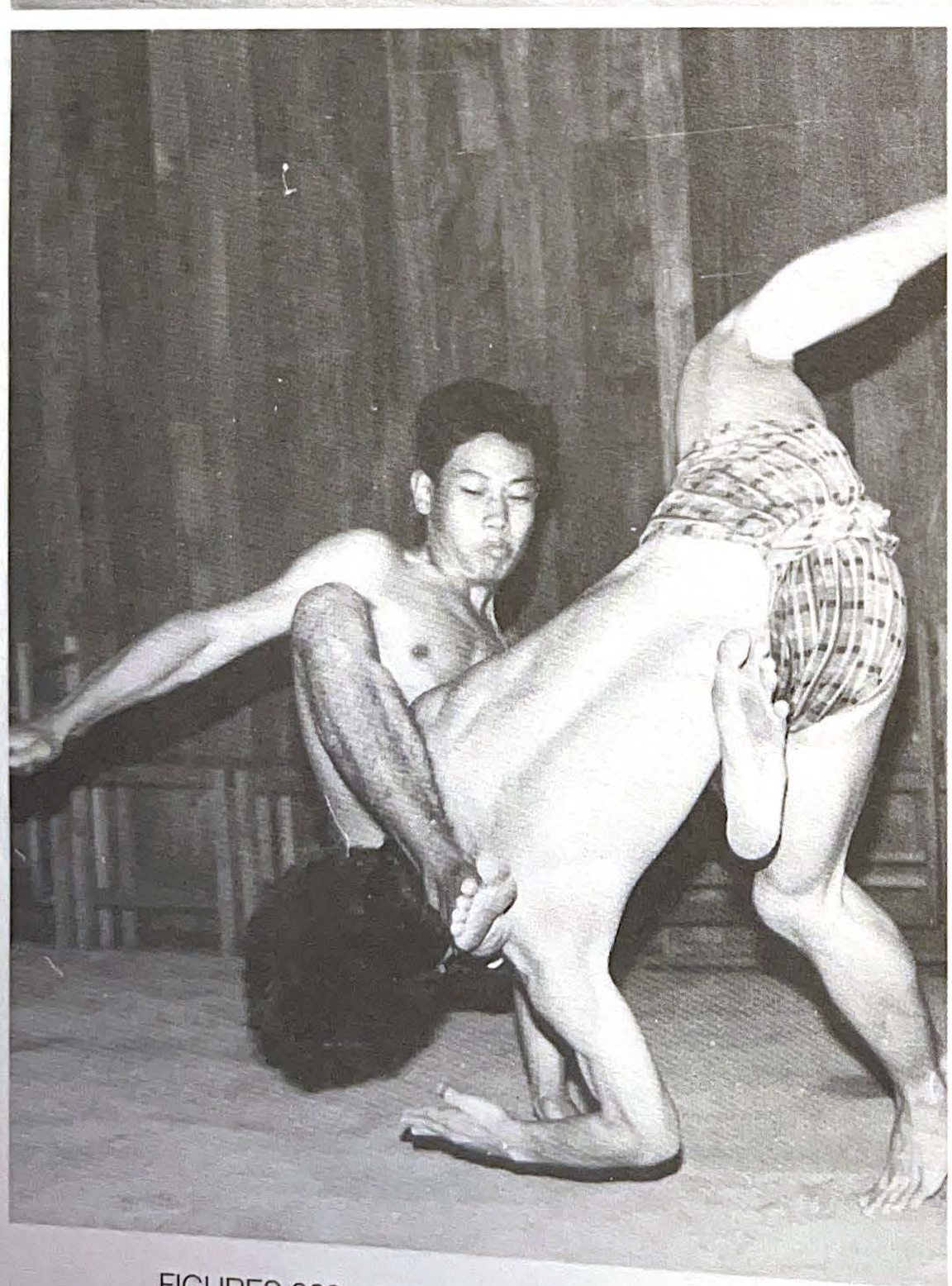
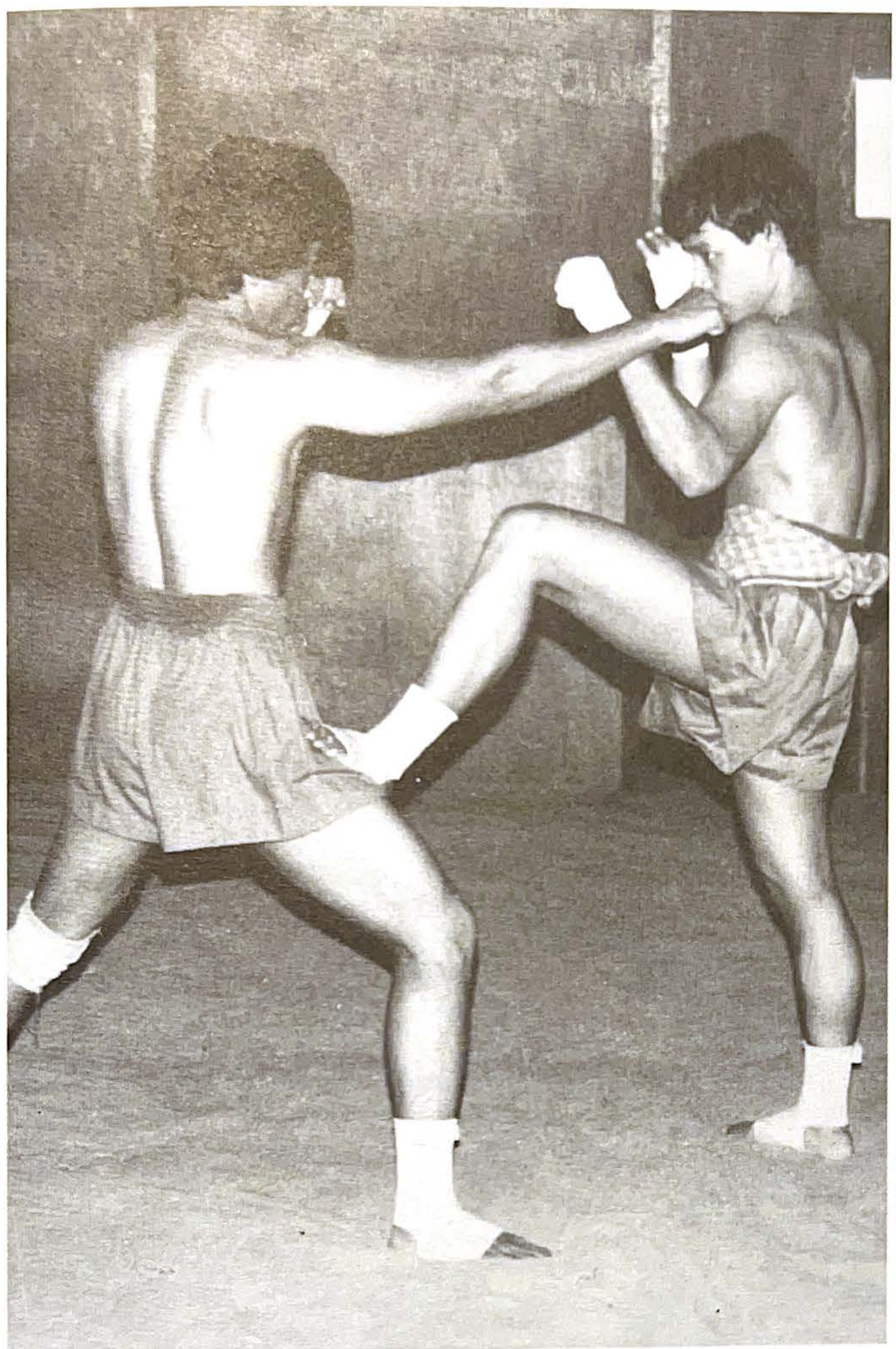
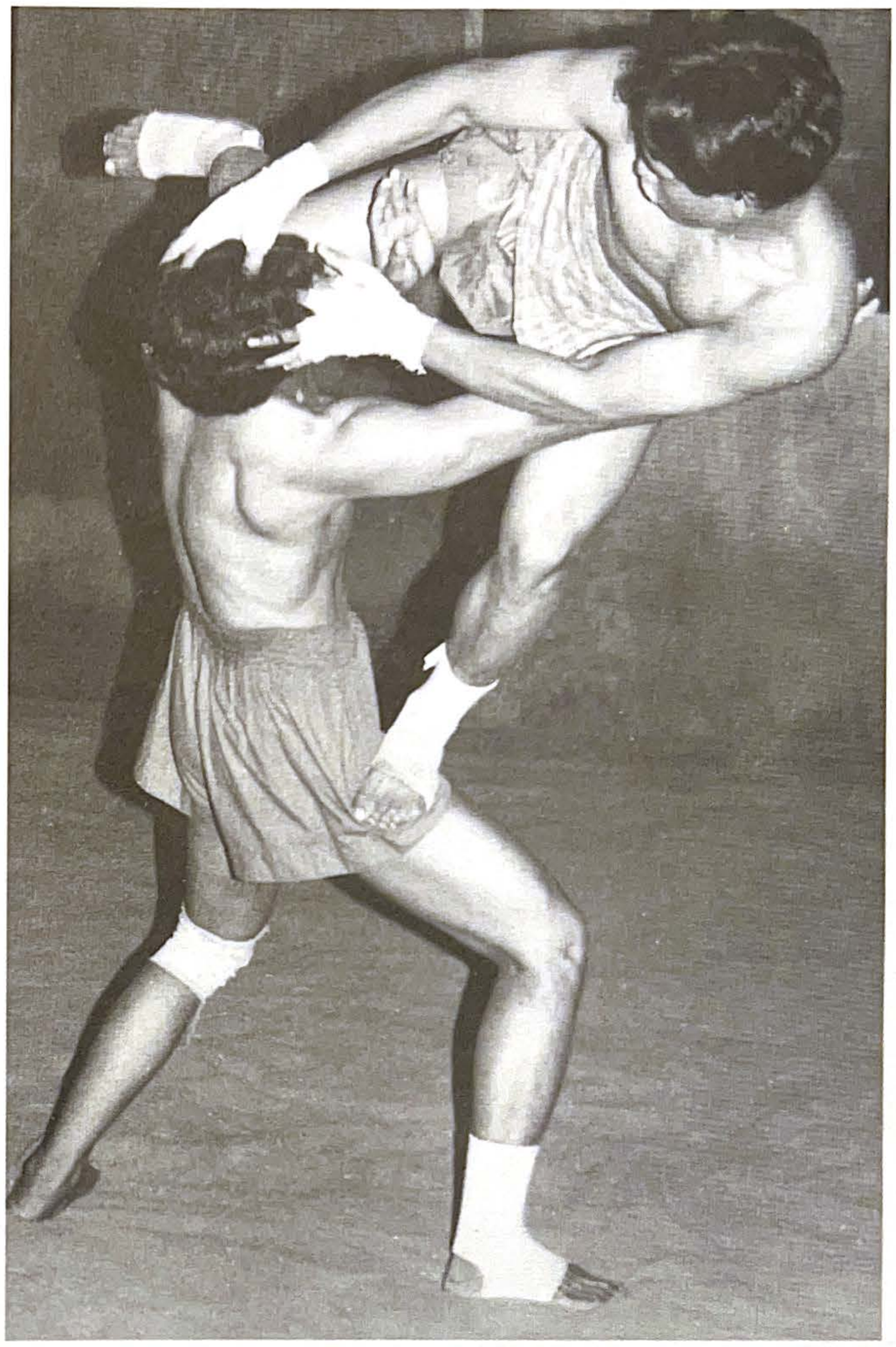




FIGURES 269 – 272: This ancient technique of Burmese boxing resembles pro-wrestling. While it would be impossible to learn this move from a book, know that the important part is making a sudden jump and catching your opponent off guard.





FIGURES 273 AND 274: Jump toward your opponent using his upper knee as support and execute a right knee kick while holding your opponent's head. This sort of kick is well known to Thai boxers.

6

Between the Rounds

Whether you are participating in karate, kickboxing, Thai boxing, or Burmese boxing there are some rules you must obey, some levels to pass, and some things to understand.

Combat does not consist solely of physical contact with the opponent and you cannot win solely through your strong muscles, technical skills, stamina, or bravery. Only a combination of all these characteristics—plus a positive attitude—gives you a chance to win.

If you are in a match and your punches are getting weaker, try low kicks or knee strikes. If he is stronger in close range, try to keep your distance and wait for his mistakes. You need to be flexible and learn to read the style and timing of your opponent.

The bell that signals the end of the round is a chance for you to collect yourself and concentrate, briefly review your mistakes, and find the weak points of your opponent. You must quickly decide on further tactics in the fight, judge your opponent's skill, stamina, and the

FIGURE 275: Nilar Win receives advice from his coach.

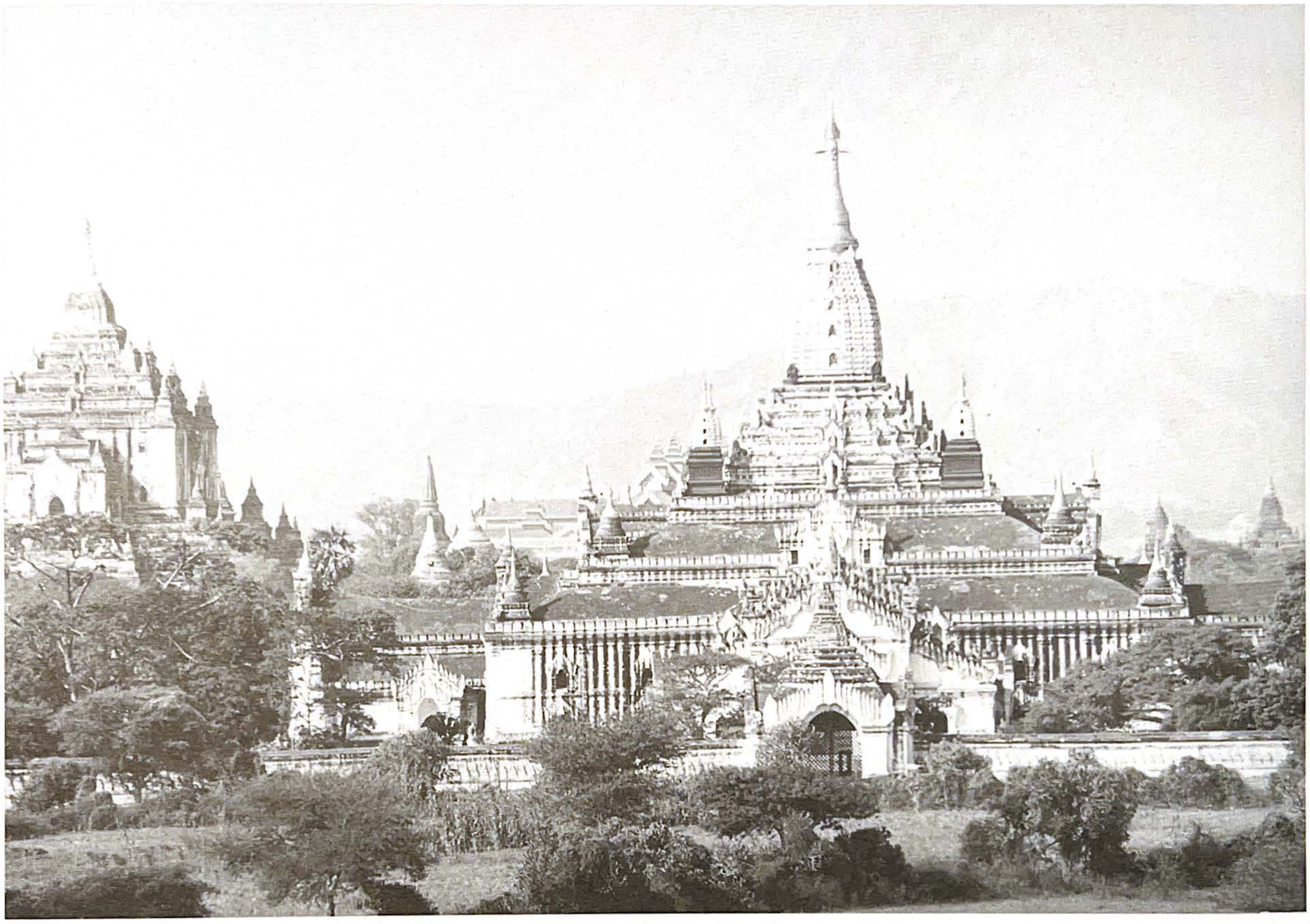


FIGURE 276: Ananda Pagoda in Bagan Valley is one of the finest, largest, and best preserved of the Bagan temples. Built in 1091 by King Kyanzittha, the temple is said to represent the endless wisdom of the Buddha. In the center of the cube, four standing Buddhas represent the four Buddhas who have attained Nirvana.

effect of your strikes. Meanwhile you must also relax, breathe deeply, and gather strength while your seconds try to treat your injuries and refresh you.

Massage is used to help muscles recover; medicines are used to close wounds and stop bleeding. Asian masseurs are usually well acquainted with the acupressure points and can eliminate pain from muscle injuries. Facial swelling should be cooled with ice. If internal injuries are suspected, however, the match should be halted so a doctor can assess the damage.

Pay close attention to the coach and follow his advice as the match progresses; the coach is the most objective judge of the situation in the ring and for setting further strategy. Many matches are lost by not listening to the coach or not applying the right tactics. You must never pay attention to advice shouted from the audience.

Try to conceal your exhaustion no matter how tired you might feel, and also hide the pain from minor but irritating injuries. If the opponent notices your discomfort or weakness, it will boost his confidence and give him an impulse for attack, which may be decisive for the outcome of the fight.

I wish you good luck in the ring!

About the Author

Zoran Rebac was born in Zagreb, Croatia, on March 24, 1954. He began his interest in the martial arts at the age of 16, when he started taekwon do. He earned his 1st Dan from Master Sun Jae Park and his 2nd Dan from Master Lee Kwang Bae. During this time he won the national championship twice and was a regular member of the national team. But very soon he realized that there were other styles of fighting, and he became especially interested in Thai boxing.

During his last year of study he traveled to Thailand. After graduating with a degree in physics from the University of Natural Science in Zagreb he found himself in Bangkok searching for Muay Thai camps. Just like in the stories where the teacher appears when the student is ready, Mr. Rebac met Dentharony Muangsurin, former champion of Thailand, who introduced him to Mr. Sa Non, promoter and owner of Muangsurin camp.

The next day at 6 a.m. Mr. Rebac was in trunks and

Author Zoran Rebac, left, is a member of the CroCop training team of Croatian star Mirko Crocop Filipovic (right). Rebac trains the fighter in kicking and knee techniques as well as close-quarters tactics.

ready for his first training session. The Thais accepted him in a friendly manner, but it was also very strange at that time to see a *farang* (white stranger) practicing Thai boxing. He quickly realized that there was a lot to learn. Since that time he has been "obsessed" with Muay Thai and South Asian martial arts. As his skills rapidly progressed, Mr. Sa Non offered him a professional contract, but at that time it was impossible to stay any longer in Thailand.

When he came back home, he opened the first Thai boxing gym in Zagreb, teaching taekwon do, Thai boxing, and tai chi chuan.

In the next several years he wrote numerous articles in sports magazines as well as a television documentary. Besides working at the Hydro-Meteorological Institute of Croatia, where he was employed in the weather forecasting department, and as a forecast presenter for national television, he became the representative of the Croatian Muay Thai Association.

His interest in martial arts led him to visit Thailand and Burma several times, but instead of just training, this time he was influenced by Buddhism, too.

In his trips to the East he focused on practicing and learning, not just collecting high-ranking belts and titles. He closely studied traditional Burmese boxing and other martial arts from Burma and Thailand. He did a photo exhibition in Zagreb called "Asian Impressions."

While Mr. Rebac has never been a champion in Thai boxing, due to his ring and practical experience he is an expert in South Asian martial arts and sports. His book on Thai boxing, *Thai Boxing Dynamite: The Explosive Art of Muay Thai*, is widely known in martial arts circles. He is the author of two videotapes on Thai and Burmese boxing, including *Burmese Boxing: The Last Gladiators of Asia*, and coauthor of the book *Olympic Taekwondo*.

"This search and studying for deeper understanding of martial arts should continue till the end of my life," said Mr. Rebac.

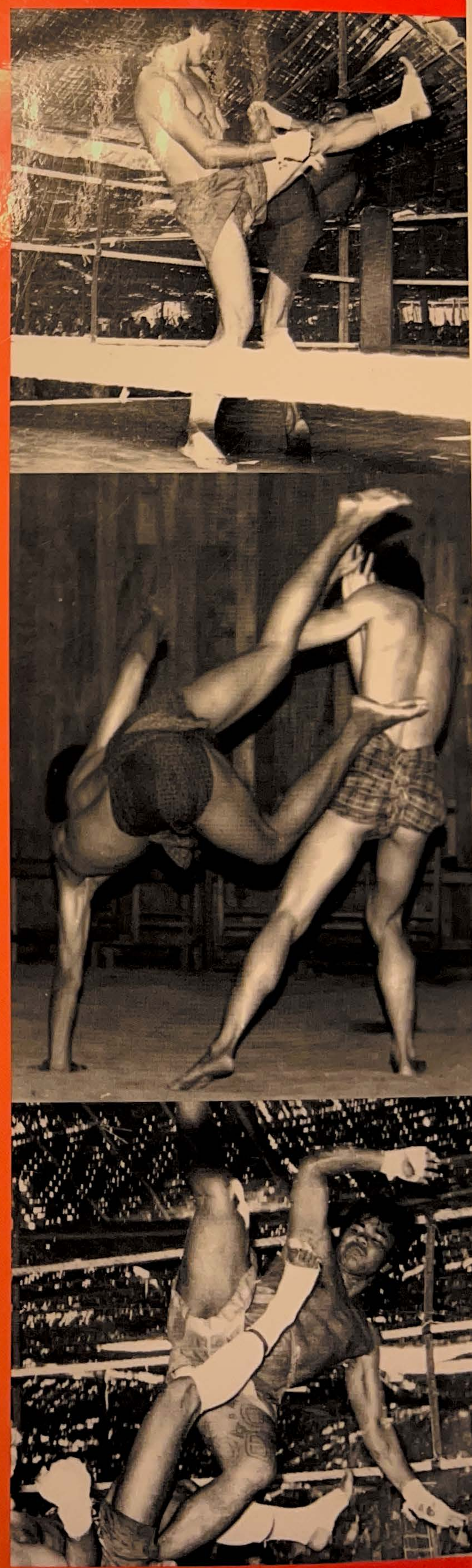
Mr. Rebac is currently the owner of a security company, a martial arts magazine (*Budo International-Croatia*), and a trainer and adviser for some well-known Muay Thai and K-1 contestants.

There's a reason the word "brutal" is so often used to describe traditional Burmese boxing. This art—a martial art in the sense of the word—has retained its cutting edge even as so many other disciplines have been watered down into mere sport.

Through rare photographs and firsthand reports, author Zoran Rebac takes you into a world few Westerners have seen. When Rebac first traveled to Asia in the 1980s, he was a rarity himself—a foreigner determined to learn the centuries-old martial traditions of the Burmese and Thai fighters. His keen interest and discipline quickly earned their respect and gained him access to training methods used by the best fighters in Asia.

In this book, you'll learn traditional Burmese boxing techniques from the basic stances, kicks, and strikes through advanced "experts only" moves; experience the rich pageantry of the tournaments; and be introduced to the grueling training exercises practiced in ancient times and the modern methods used by fighters today.

Traditional Burmese Boxing, the first English translation of Rebac's 1987 book *Burmanski Tradicionalni Ful Kontakt*, is an invaluable guide to the fascinating world of the Burmese boxer.



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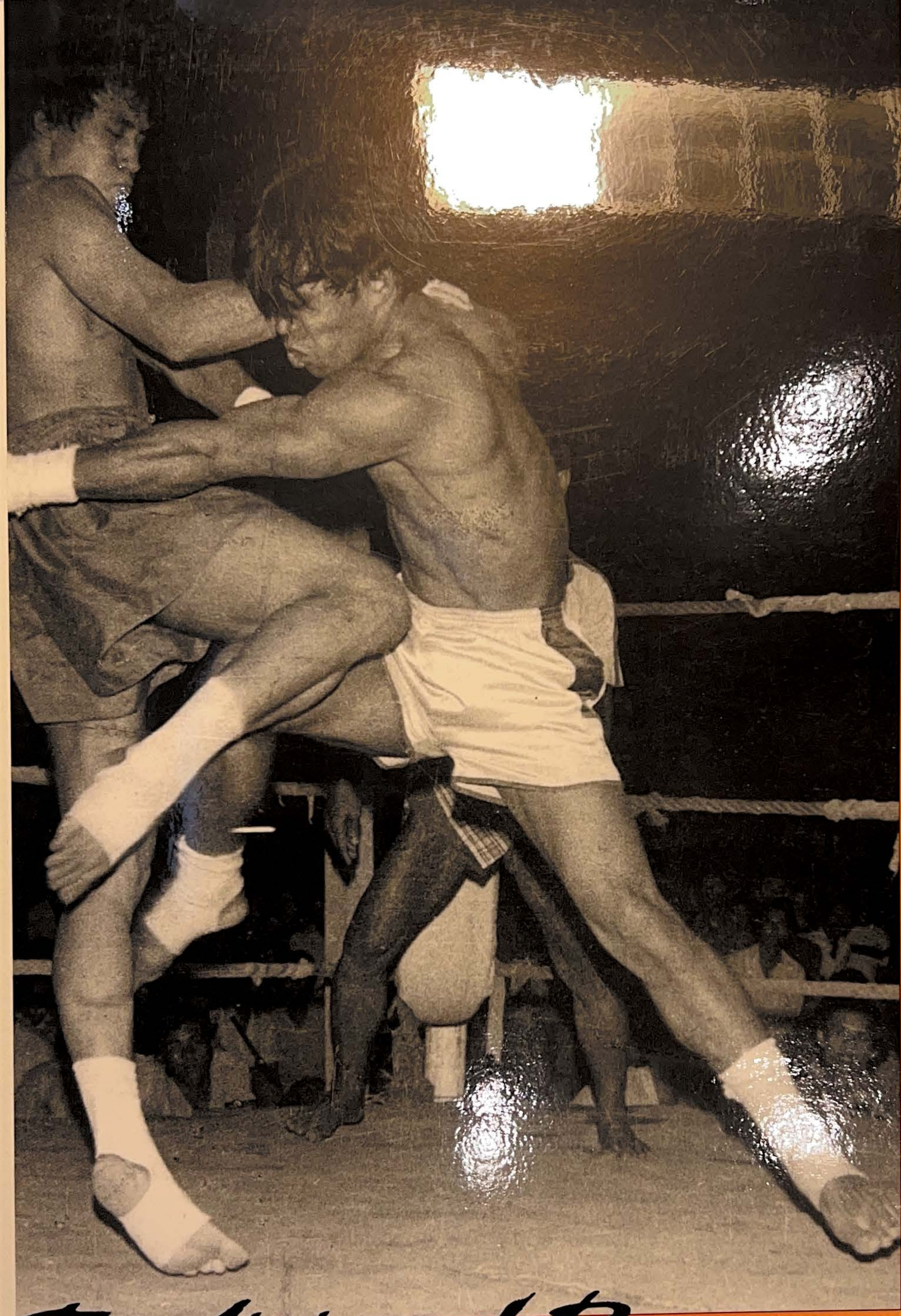

Ancient and Modern Methods from Burma's Training Camps

Traditional Burmese BOXING

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